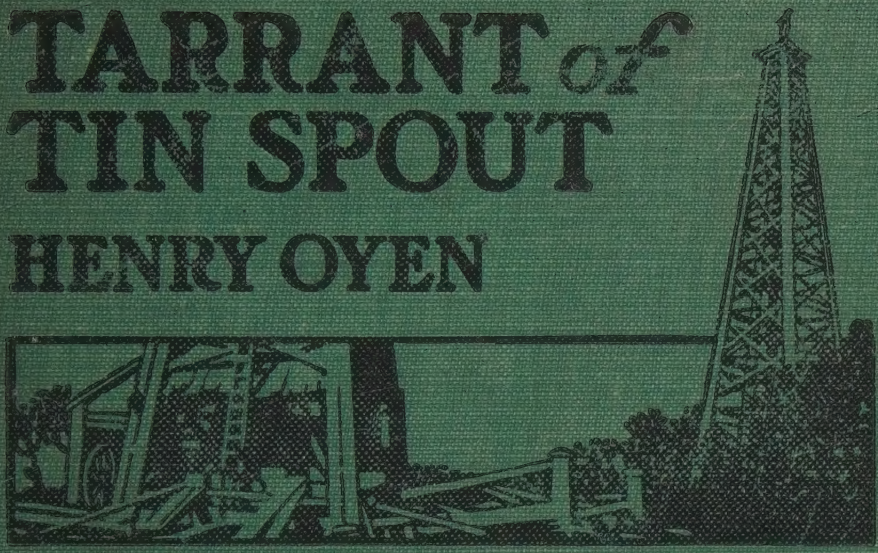
TARRANT of TIN SPOUT

HENRY OYEN



C. P. Jensen

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BY

HENRY OYEN

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"TWISTED TRAILS," "BIG FLAT," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

A VIOLENT spring cloudburst had raised the waters of the Rio Canyada to a degree that threatened the Ft. W. & D. trestle; and as a consequence the passengers on the southward-bound Limited, held for orders, were afforded an opportunity to see the oil town of Tin Spout, Texas.

In all truth there was not much to see, and little, if any, of that was pleasing to the eye, while most of it was depressingly ugly. Tin Spout, the oil hamlet, enhanced the drab Northern Texas landscape no more than it had done in the very recently passed day when it was Tin Spout, the cattle town. The first impression that one gained was that of a community totally and hopelessly sunken in a morass of mud. At present it was a reddish, sticky kind of mud which seemed to brand all things—buildings, motor cars, horses and men—that came in contact with it, but in dry weather the mud dried up and the wind blew it about, so the buildings of Tin Spout, above the mud splashings, had taken upon themselves a coating of heavy brown dust.

The buildings could not be said to add greatly to the scene. They were in the main unpainted board shacks of a single story in height, fronting upon the short stretch of churned-up and rutted mud road along the railroad

track which represented Tin Spout's main street. The oil derricks in the field about the town towered high above the squalid buildings. A few of the derricks were built of new, clean timbers, but the majority of them were black and grimy and soaked inches deep in the oil and mud from the wells.

A hot spring sun had emerged from the black clouds which had provided the deluge and the damp town steamed uncomfortably. There was a constant chug-chug, chug-chug in the air. It was a lazy, unimpressive sound, and it came from the pumps which, moving up and down interminably above the wells, drew the greasy crude petroleum from the depths of the earth.

In the scant shade offered by the discarded box car which served Tin Spout as a railway station a young man was standing at ease, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He was tall and brown. His apparel proclaimed him a working oilman, a producer, in the fields where the wells are drilled, for he wore the regulation khaki shirt and trousers and high laced boots of his craft. On his head, however, was a sombrero of the large, expensive kind which may be seen offered as second prize at the rodeos in the horse and cattle country. The sombrero gave a clew to the young man's antecedents. No one save an ex-cattleman would have worn such a hat in such an environment. Perhaps the sombrero was even a clew to the true nature of Spence Tarrant; its suggestion was that though the oilman was dominant there had remained alive within him a trace of the reckless, free rider of the ranges.

"Wayne," he drawled softly to a nattily dressed young man who came up to him excitedly, "you put your hat on or the sun will get you."

"Darn the sun!" snapped Wayne. "I've got news, Spence—big news—million-dollar news—for all of us!"

"You have got oil fever, that's what you've got," said Tarrant, after a moment of scrutiny. "You put on your hat."

The young man obeyed, only to remove the hat from his head to utilise it as a means of emphasising his gesticulations.

"There's a hundred-million-dollar boom coming to Tin Spout, Spence!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I saw Bodine down at Ranger Falls. Bodine, the Miracle Man, they call him. He has selected this Tin Spout field as the scene of the next big boom. He can bring it here. He will bring it here. Think of it, Spence; a hundred-million-dollar investment proposition! That's his program; told me so himself. And what have little operators like us been doing here? We've got a few little wells on the jack; we bring in a few more once in a awhile. Barely enough to keep the field going. Yes, sir! Barely going. The Tin Spout field is on the way to the graveyard; and here Bodine, the Miracle Man, decides to make it boom. I can feel the boom coming, Spence. It's in the air."

He leaned forward with a fanatical gleam in his eyes.

"It's the oil age, man! Look where the price is now. And that's just the beginning. We'll have three dollars high gravity yet. Think of it, Spence, three dollars a barrel at the well! Oil is the great new force in the world. It's the coming power. Industry will run on it; it will cover the seven seas. The next big war is going to be fought for oil. There'll be another name for it in the history books, but the good, old greasy crude oil will be the real cause. And we're right in the heart of the game.

What we've made before won't be chicken feed. A hundred-million-dollar oil boom coming right here, and we're going to get our share of it!"

"Let her come, Wayne," drawled Tarrant.

"Spence," said the enthusiast earnestly, "did you hit any pay in that new hole of yours?"

"A trace of it," replied Tarrant. "I am in town now to get Jim Hennessy to come out and shoot her."

"Yes. And what will it amount to if you do bring in a well?" demanded the other. "A little pumper, on the jack! Practically nothing! Spence, what's the big feature in business to-day? Salesmanship! What's made the big men in this oil game? Drilling holes in the ground? Not on your whiskers! Vision, development, promotion—salesmanship! What's made this country the biggest land on the face of the globe to-day? Advertising! What's advertising? Supersalesmanship. Capitalising your brains. Spence—Spence, we've got to quit fooling away our time and capitalise our opportunities. We've got 'em. The boom is coming. We will help it come. How? Organisation. Advertising, propaganda, salesmanship! It's going to make a lot of millionaires. It's going to make us millionaires, and I tell you it's coming soon!"

"All right," drawled Tarrant again, "let her come."

"'Let her come!'" mocked Wayne. "Great Scott, Spence, ain't I telling you it's going to be a world beater, a millionaire maker, a—a real boom?"

"Wayne," said Tarrant, "it seems to me that you did sort of appear to be trying to convey that impression."

"Then why don't you wake up to what it means?"

snapped Wayne. "Why don't you indicate you appreciate its significance?"

Tarrant slowly thrust back his sombrero and turned his weather-browned face toward the speaker. His blue eyes, surprisingly young and fresh in the leathery hardness of his countenance were mirrors of innocence and guilelessness, and there was even a hint of melancholy in his expression.

"I thought you knew, Wayne," he said with just a trace of aggrieved surprise in his soft drawl.

"Knew what?"

"Why I don't catch the fever like you have done."

"What do you mean?" demanded Wayne.

"I am immune," said Tarrant simply.

"Immune to what?"

"Oil fever."

"Yes, you are!" Wayne exclaimed with a laugh. "Now you're talking loose. They don't breed any man born of woman to be immune to that. It hits all that are exposed to it and gets all it hits."

"Not me," said Tarrant, with a serious shake of the head; "I'm immune. I can handle the stuff and not be affected by it. You'll allow I've been exposed a right smart, won't you, Wayne? And you never saw me running round tearing my shirt, did you? I'm telling you the reason; I'm immune. I can't catch it. It won't take on me," he concluded gravely. "Sometimes I almost wish it could, but it's something beyond my control. A man can't help how he's bred, can he?"

"What are you talking about?" said Wayne in bewilderment.

"It's a fact," responded Tarrant. "You know my folks

have been pesticating round this neck of the range for a good many years back?"

"Yes, and all they got to show for it you could put in your eye," was the reply.

Tarrant nodded gravely.

"All they got to show for it I could put in my eye, if that will make you feel any better," he agreed. "But that's how come. I'm immune and can handle oil wells without contracting oil fever. You see, Wayne, my old granddaddy made this neck of the range his particular stamping ground. He was a great old fellow for straying off from the herd all by his lonesome, looking up better hunting grounds and so on, and one fine day when he was up here all alone he got himself cornered by a bunch of Kiowa bucks on the warpath. I reckon the old hombre was quite a handful to handle, because he gave them all the fight they wanted and got away; but before he did—they had done it to him."

The drawling, serious recital had cast a spell over the listener.

"Done what?" he demanded. "Scalped him?"

"If it had only been that!" murmured Tarrant. "No, the old gent kept his hair, but he was out of luck just the same. You know, the Kiowas used to poison their war arrows in those days; used to dip 'em in a mixture their medicine man cooked up for them. My grandpop got away all right, but before he did those Kiowas had shot him so full of war arrows he came riding home looking like a sage hen that had been caught in a cyclone. But that wasn't the real trouble. The Kiowa medicine man happened to have an off day that day and he didn't have any medicine ready, so he had the bucks dip their arrows

in a black slush pool side of a little creek. Wayne, you could never guess what that slush was?"

"What was it?" asked Wayne impatiently.

"An oil seep!" cried Tarrant, slapping him boisterously on the back. "Man, they shot the old hombre so full of crude petroleum that it inoculated him and his whole darn family and rendered them immune to oil fever forever and ever!"

Wayne choked, grew red in the face and swore.

"I was just explaining," murmured Tarrant.

"Oh, talk business!" protested Wayne. "Wake up to the situation! Things are going to happen here. You'll see some excitement here inside a week."

"Sooner than that," said Tarrant. "Look over there."

CHAPTER II

SOME horsemen who were unloading a consignment of draft horses for the oil fields from a car on the siding had led the last horse in the car out onto the runway, and at the sight of him a shout of dismay rose from the throat of the fat half-Mexican consignee.

"Holy red roaring! What in blazes they think I'm doing! running a circus?" he bellowed. "You little calico runt! What you doing in a car with honest draft horses?"

The animal thus addressed stood with two dirty fore-feet on the runway, leaning back against the halter while he somnolently surveyed his new surroundings. Even the Pullman passengers from the Limited, grouped round the siding to see the fun, were aware that he did not belong in a shipment of chunky draft animals. He was too light in weight, too thin in the legs and neck. He was a saddle horse, and he was as ugly as he was sleepy looking. Nature apparently had mixed the colors on the day of his birth. To the fore of a line drawn roughly about his girth he might have been called a dark horse irregularly splotched with white, and to the rear of the line he was a white horse spotted with black. As he emerged wholly from the gloom of the car into the glare of the sun one of the men cried out:

"I know him! It's that Nine Spot horse, the trained bucker, that was in the rodeo down to Forth Worth!"

The consignee swore again.

"A calico bucker! And me paying for oil-field draft horses! Bring him down!"

The man at the horse's head led him down and spoke gently to him; and the gaudy beast rewarded him by rising upon its hind legs and striving earnestly to beat the man's head off.

"Hang to him, horseman!" jeered the oilmen, and the horse jerked free and ran. He did not run far, however, for the horsemen were experienced and a rope was thrown and snubbed so swiftly and effectively that the pinto went down in a heap.

"I'll have his hide anyway!" roared the buyer. "Somebody gimme a gun. Darn a shipper who will make a mistake like that. Darn a horse that think's he a prize fighter. Who's getting that gun? I'll make a good horse out of him in about two seconds, if he'll stand still long enough to let me hit him."

A boy ran into a store and appeared with a shotgun. The effect was distressing upon the passengers. Those who had decided to seek such nourishment as Tin Spout afforded halted in their movement toward Chili Joe's eating house. A few stared in morbid curiosity, others retreated to the Pullman; but one of them, a young, slim girl with light hair, whose blue eyes were flashing with indignation, stepped forth and confronted the irate *caballero.*

"You brute!" said she, and the oilmen roared with glee at her words. "Do you actually mean to destroy that beautiful pony?"

"Pony?" snorted the horseman. "Lady, that ain't no pony. That's a devil in a horsehide."

"He's a finer thing than you are!" retorted the girl. The oilmen shouted their approval. She turned upon them instantly.

"Are you men going to stand by and see this done?" she said, appealing to the nearest spectator. This spectator happened to be a tall, gangling mule skinner, and at her words he was smitten dumb by confusion.

"Can't this be stopped?" she pleaded.

"Hell, yes!" stammered the skinner. "I'll shoot old Sam if you say the word."

Another roar of laughter greeted this sally and the girl's face flushed in embarrassment.

An easy, drawling voice spoke casually from the shade of the box car.

"Why don't you make him your saddle horse, Sam?"

"Hello, Tarrant!" cried the horseman heartily. "What? Me ride that wildcat with hoofs? Man, I ain't no rodeo performer. You take off that sombrero, Spence. You're an oilman. Where do you head in talking horse to me?"

"I'm agreed," drawled Tarrant. "A man shouldn't talk horse except to a horseman. No horseman would make any fuss over forking a little calico pony like that."

A large wad of bills came forth promptly from the horseman's pocket.

"Here's a hundred dollars says you can't stay with him," he said belligerently.

"Who, me?" said Tarrant. "Put back your money, Sam. I used to ride *horses*."

"A hundred dollars, oilman!" cried the *caballero*. "Put up or change your hat!"

Tarrant removed the sombrero, inspected it casually and replaced it on his head.

"I like the style, Sam," said he.

"Then dig!" commanded Sam. "Tell you what I'll do, Spence: I'll bet the pinto against your hat. You got

no business wearing that hat, fooling round oil. Me, I can become it. What say?"

"That's a bet," agreed Tarrant. "I can use that little saddle pony, Sam, and you won't get my hat."

"Throw him and saddle him, boys!" shouted the horseman. "Back away, folks, and give a long-geared oilman room to hit the dirt. I'll take the hat now, Spence—no?"

The skill with which the horse was thrown and saddled testified to the number of former riders among the oil workers. It was an oil country now, a land of industry, of machines, but only a few years ago the horse had been king there instead of gasoline, and the cult of the saddle horse still was strong. The men began to express opinions. They were oilmen, and therefore anything that might add a new fillip of excitement to their already tense lives was welcome; and anything that might be made a gambling proposition to supplement the great gamble of drilling for oil was doubly welcome. Operators, lease hounds, rough-necks and skinners shook money at one another and sought stakeholders. Chili Joe, proprietor of the Skinners' Rest eating house, ran out and began to hunt odds. By the time Nine Spot stood saddled and ready the contest had assumed the proportions of a great betting affair; and as Tarrant went swiftly into the saddle the long, piercing cry rose from a dozen throats:

"Eeeeee-yow! Ri-i-ide 'im, cowboy!"

Nine Spot made three catlike springs as soon as he felt the weight on his back, and turned round so suddenly that his tail seemed to flick his nose. He next dashed himself recklessly against the box-car station.

In bewilderingly rapid succession the pony became a great cat, supple-spined and limber-legged, that clawed

at the air and shook himself; he became a stiff-legged old steer, bumping over the ground in four-footed leaps, each of which jarred himself and rider to the marrow. He twisted and changed ends. At last he arose to the summit of equine frenzy. He flung himself up on his hind legs till his outstretched nose was in a line with his tail. A moment he poised so, a spectacle which glued the tongues in the mouths of the spectators. Then with a savage grunt he flung himself backward, seeking to crush his rider in the fall, even if he killed himself in doing so.

Tarrant was expecting the move. He was free from the stirrups ere the fall began, yet so sudden, so fierce was the backward heave of the beast that the passengers shrieked as they fancied him pinned beneath the saddle. The knowing natives saw him fling himself out from under the falling animal and their shouts acclaimed the perilous feat expertly done.

"Stay with him! You're a rider!"

Out of the welter of mud, of flying hoofs the man rose first, and the reins were in his hands. Like a boxer waiting a fresh onslaught and ready to carry the attack to a finish, he waited while the horse rolled catwise twice and prepared to rise. Then he was in the saddle. Nine Spot found his head pulled up by an iron hand, iron legs gripped his sides, a sombrero fanned his head, and a triumphant voice shrieked:

"Ee-yow! Yow! Yip, yip, yip-ee!"

The horse lunged against the bit, thought better of it, and, having gone through his customary performance, subsided with a shudder of relief.

"Keep your big hat; you sure are entitled to wear it,"

cried the horseman. "Man, you ride too well; you'll never amount to anything in the oil business!"

A burst of laughter greeted this sally and a crowd of men swarmed about the pony and his rider.

On the outskirts of the throng a steady-eyed block of a man with snow-white hair, waited patiently for the fun to subside, then called out in businesslike tones:

"Tarrant! Can I see you a minute?"

"Hello, Hennessy," greeted Tarrant. He slid off the horse and approached the well shooter. The latter jerked his head in the direction of a man at his side, but made no move to effect an introduction.

"This party is from the Pan-National Syndicate, Spence; Bodine's company, you know," said Hennessy. "They have bought me out. The Hennessy Torpedo Company is theirs now. This man allows they don't want me to shoot your well this afternoon. They are out to stop all new production here while they're pulling the wires for their boom."

Tarrant's first glimpse at the stranger was sufficient to give him an unpleasant impression. The stranger was intently scrutinising the young oilman. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His swarthy countenance was hard and crafty, and a wide scar ran across one side of his face from the lobe of the ear to the tip of the nose. Tarrant looked him over calmly from head to toe and deliberately turned away.

"I don't see what all that has got to do with me, Jim," said he. "You made a contract to shoot that well some time ago. I am holding you to that contract."

The stranger exhaled a puff of smoke from the cigarette he was smoking without interrupting his study of Tarrant.

"It might be good business for you to let the well lay," said he.

"Elmer and Buck are getting her ready for the shoot, Hennessy," continued Tarrant, completely ignoring the scarred man and addressing himself entirely to the well shooter. "I am expecting you to come out this afternoon."

Hennessy nodded.

"I have got to do it, Spence," he said. "I told them so. I don't make a contract I don't live up to. But I am making it plain—that will be the last one I can shoot for you."

"There won't be any more for anybody to shoot in this field for some time to come," supplemented the stranger flatly.

Tarrant turned slowly and regarded the man with mild curiosity.

"That is important—if true," said he with an obvious challenge in his tone and manner. The stranger noted it instantly. A cold light gleamed in his eyes and went out, and he smiled on the scarred side of his face.

"We'll let you shoot this one, since Hennessy has contracted to do it," he said.

Hennessy glanced apprehensively at Tarrant, but the oilman's expression in no way betrayed the effect the words had upon him.

"I'm obliged," he said quietly.

Silently the two men eyed each other. The single movement discernible was the flicker of the stranger's eyelid as the smoke from his cigarette crept upward.

As he faced the scarred man Tarrant appreciated for the first time the truth of the rumours that a new force

was about to make itself felt in the Tin Spout oil field. The stranger man stood forth as the forerunner of a new day. He was a scout, but in contrast to the duties of the regular oil scout, which consists of appraising the wells and structural formation of a new field, the newcomer seemed bent upon the appraisal of the men who were ahead of him in the field and of Tarrant in particular. The latter understood that he was up for inspection, and he saw that the inspection was not friendly. By the expression in the stranger's bleak, narrow-lidded eyes, it was obvious that he had come with prejudice in his mind, and as his deliberate scrutiny of the young oil-man continued it was apparent that he discovered nothing which tended to remove or temper his prejudice. Tarrant's intense nature had responded to the stranger's attitude as if to a spoken challenge, but no one, observing his countenance, could have estimated by his expression the nature of his swift change of moods. In fact he had promptly effaced all expression from his face and it was now no more scrutable than a brown leather mask.

"All right, Hennessy," he said, turning away, "much obliged."

Tarrant stood still, but his eyes followed the man till he was out of sight. He did not speak for some time.

"Hard-boiled," he said finally: "who is he, Jim?"

"His name is Grogan," replied the well shooter. "Anyhow, that's what he goes by. From what I can make out, he's sort of Bodine's right-hand man. He was sent up here to size you up, if you're asking my opinion. Came and asked me to point you out. I reckon they had heard of you, Spence, and wanted to get a line on your formation."

"How come?" said Tarrant.

"They are out to combine everything here in the Pan National Syndicate," was the reply. "They want complete control. I reckon they heard you weren't so easy to control."

"Do you reckon, Jim," said Tarrant with a smile, "they have picked that hard guy to control me?"

"Oh, no," said Hennessy; "they just want a line on you, to know what sort of a proposition to make you, I reckon."

"Have you got your outfit, Jim?" asked Tarrant, abruptly changing the subject.

"Sure have," replied the shooter. "Ready to start any time you are."

"I am not quite ready yet," said Tarrant. "I will be, right after lunch. I've got to see—a party."

CHAPTER III

THE "party" he had to see was the slim, fair-haired girl who had faced the enraged horseman so indignantly.

Tarrant looked for her in the crowd, but she was gone. The passengers were crowding into Chili Joe's eating house, and finally he had a glimpse of her back among the late comers. He stood undecided for a moment while his eyes followed her as she disappeared inside.

"She will be getting on that train soon and riding on and I will never see her again," ran his thoughts. Then, because it was natural for him to do so, he made his decision promptly.

"Yes, I will," he thought. "I want to see her some more, and I will."

He pushed his way into the Skinner's Rest resolved to create an opportunity for further speech with her. He saw her about to seat herself at a table in the corner. Across the table from her was another vacant seat, and instantly Tarrant marked it for his own. There were obstacles and complications, however, to the achievement of his aim, and to some men they might have been regarded as insuperable. There was a throng between him and the desired table, and two men, one a well-dressed traveler, the other a young driller with a purple silk shirt, were bearing down upon the seat opposite the girl with eager intentness.

The boy from the oil field was winning. In fact, he

seemed certain to have the race won, for as Tarrant entered the room the boy was but a step or two from the coveted chair. He did not reach it, however. Through the room rang a piercing cry:

"Don't shoot, gents; don't shoot!"

The boy froze where he was. In this he did not differ from any other person in the crowded room, with the exception of Tarrant, but his act was the one that was important to Tarrant's intention. Tarrant swept imperturbably through the crowd, won his way to the girl's table and was in the seat opposite her before the crowd had recovered from the shock. Then there was reaction, confusion and presently a little anger.

"Who said 'don't shoot'?" demanded Chili Joe.

"I did," said Tarrant evenly.

"You—you see somebody going to shoot somebody, Mr. Tarrant?" stammered Joe.

"Nope."

"Then how come you yell like that?"

"It was good advice, wasn't it?" demanded Tarrant firmly. "You wouldn't want to see a shooting in your place, would you? I wouldn't like to see it. Give your place a bad name. You prove to me it wasn't good advice and I'll apologise."

"But, Tarrant," protested Joe, scratching his bald head in bewilderment, "nobody was going to shoot nobody, was they?"

"How do you know?" demanded Tarrant sternly.

"Well—was they?"

"How do I know?" said Tarrant. "I am no mind reader. I stand on my first proposition, Joe; you prove it was bad advice and I'll apologise. What do you say?"

"I dunno," muttered Joe, staring in amazement. "I—I—oh, shucks, it's too hot to figger it out!" he cried and retreated to his kitchen, grumbling as he went that he reckoned Tarrant must have gone crazy.

"Yes, he has!" bitterly murmured the purple-shirted boy who had lost his seat. "Crazy as a fox!"

The youth stood his ground for a time staring darkly at Tarrant as if prepared to say something, but he thought better of it and slouched away while the travelers buzzed and stared in wonderment as they began their meals, and oilmen choked on small bites of food or hurried outside and bent double with laughter.

Tarrant was oblivious, blissfully oblivious of it all. His conscience troubled him no more than that of a stag which has scattered possible rivals. In fact, he had quite forgotten the means used in obtaining his wish, for the girl had remained seated throughout the general consternation in the room and now she was staring across the table at Tarrant in frank appraisal.

"You are not crazy, are you?" she asked presently.

"They haven't proved it on me yet," he replied.

"I see no reason why anyone shouldn't be crazy here," she went on; "it seems to be in the air. What a bedlam! Are they all insane?"

"None of them!" laughed Tarrant. "At least, as I say, they haven't proved it against any of us—yet. It's the oil fever that does it. After you've been here awhile you don't notice it—because you would have the fever yourself."

"I hope," she said, "that I shall find Ranger Falls a little more civilised."

"Ah!" said Tarrant in relief. "Much obliged!"

She stared.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what I wanted to hear."

"What is that?"

"Where you are going," said he. "I certainly am obliged to you."

"I don't see what possible difference it can make to you where I am going," she said swiftly. "You don't even know my name."

"I don't just see what names have got to do with it," said Tarrant. "Are you stopping at the Falls awhile?"

"Is this a crude attempt at a flirtation?" she demanded coldly.

"Heaven forbid!" he exclaimed seriously. "I will prove it isn't."

"You think you will have the opportunity?"

"I aim to make the opportunity," he replied. "Just as I aimed to get this seat. If you would tell me where you are stopping at the Falls it would simplify matters, but I reckon you won't do that."

Her look of scorn failed to disturb him and he went on:

"When I saw you going in here I thought: 'She is getting away from you, boy; go after her.' So I did. When you tell me you're going to Ranger Falls I breathe more easily. It will be easy for me to find you there."

"Will you kindly remember," she broke in, "that we are complete strangers?"

"Everybody has to be strangers sometime," he retorted calmly. "I reckon Adam and Eve were strangers to each other once."

"Possibly," she admitted, "but times have changed a

little, haven't they? And this is scarcely a Garden of Eden, is it?"

"No," he agreed; "the different species of animals are present, but—oh, Joe!" he called to the proprietor, "have you got any apples?"

"Apples?" gasped Chili Joe. "Where do you reckon you are?"

"No; you were right," said Tarrant. "It isn't the Garden of Eden."

"All aboard!" The call of a trainman announcing the departure of the train interrupted him. The girl accepted the announcement as a means of escape. She paid her check and stood up.

"*Adios*—till I see you at Ranger Falls," said Tarrant, rising and bowing low.

"Garden of Eden! Apples!" she gasped. She looked at him a moment, then putting her handkerchief to her mouth to smother the laughter rising within her she bolted for the train.

"Know who that was, Spence?" asked Hennessy, slipping into the seat she had vacated.

"Who is she?"

"She's the daughter of Doctor Dickinson, one of the big bugs of Bodine's crowd," replied the well shooter. "From Chicago. She's going down to Ranger Falls to live with her dad. They tell me Bodine paid his old girl off and got her out of town."

CHAPTER IV

MARJORIE DICKINSON sat up straight and tense on the green plush of the Pullman as the train, slowly feeling its way over a sodden track-bed, carried her away from Tin Spout to her destination at Ranger Falls. Her lips parted occasionally, and then she would press them tightly together, as if she were doing her best to control the outward manifestations of the emotional tumult which seethed within her. Her efforts were far from successful. She was just twenty; and the slight flush which toned the fair skin of her cheeks, and the dancing light in her young blue eyes, flashed an obvious signal of virginal Youth vibrantly responsive to a succession of thrills.

It was all so new to her. A month ago she had not known that such places as Tin Spout existed. If she had been aware of the existence of oil fields in general her knowledge had been so vague as to be negligible. Certainly she could not by any stretch of the imagination have conceived that the sudden development of the great oil boom in the Southwest with its consequent influence upon potential investors throughout the country, could possibly reach within her sheltered, protected existence and rudely divert her life from its apparently ordained channels. She was the only child of Dr. Warner Dickinson, and the name of Dr. Dickinson, the child specialist, was a shibboleth in the life of Chicago's prosperous North Shore circles. Save for the loss of his wife while Mar-

jorie was a child, the rewards of a useful and impeccable career were his in full measure. His practice had yielded him a comfortable fortune. He was respected, and even honoured; and there was no trace of weakness or of avarice apparent in his character, until the epidemic of "oil-fever" began to sweep the country. Dr. Dickinson had met Mr. Jackson Bodine, President of the Pan National Syndicate, at his club, and at Bodine's invitation had made a journey to the Texas oil fields. The doctor returned from the trip smitten with the fever of speculation in its most virulent form. In a short time he gave up his practice and joined the throng of excited citizens of all classes who were pouring into the drab oil country of the Southwest, drawn by the common lure of the great oil boom.

Marjorie had been pleased. "You should have given up practice years ago," she said. "Now you can get your sleep at nights. Why don't you take me with you to Texas, daddy?"

"The oil fields are not the place for my little Marjie," replied the doctor, laughing. "No; I'll take you for a trip some day, but not down there."

During the doctor's absence Marjorie's life continued in its smooth channels, with no hint of the cloud that was gathering about her.

"Yes, father has finally retired," she replied to those who inquired. "He's in Texas at present on some business, but he will be back soon."

Dr. Dickinson did not come back soon. Fortune apparently smiled upon him from the first. Mr. Bodine, as resident of the Pan National Syndicate, frankly admitting that he wished to associate with investors of the doctor's

standing, let him in on a quiet little lease deal; and the ten thousand dollars which the doctor invested promptly became thirty thousand when the lease was sold to the holders of Pan National stock.

"Will you take your nice, little profit and quit, doctor?" asked Bodine gravely as he handed over the check; but within he was smiling confidently. He had seen too many solid, elderly citizens become innoculated with the virus of petroleum speculation to have any doubts concerning the symptoms of the weakness. Dr. Dickinson, his sense of greed awakened for the first time in his life, followed the usual course. He disposed of the sound, stable bonds in his safe deposit box, converted his income-producing properties in Chicago into ready money, and became a member of the board of directors of the Pan National Syndicate. Golden opportunities seemed to present themselves on every hand, and fabulous returns seemed certain, if one only had the capital to take advantage of the situation. A mortgage was placed on the snug home which Marjorie occupied. And still opportunities crowded upon him; and he had no more capital with which to make them his. Presently he found himself desperately scurrying about for means with which to carry on his speculations; and then the demon of avarice whispered: "Marjorie!"

This thought had asserted itself soon after it became apparent to Dr. Dickinson's excited mind that Mr. Bodine was losing interest in him. In truth Bodine was playing a game so big that Dr. Dickinson, his valuable standing and his considerable investment, represented only a piece of bait, and he was too busy with new prospects to waste much time on an investor who was landed. To

the doctor the memory of the private deal in which Bodine had favored him was like a single drink of liquor to a drunkard. Driven by his newly awakened lust for gold he racked his brains for the means—any means!—to recall his intimacy with Bodine. He studied the promoter's character with a view to cultivating him, and thus the devil that ruled him came to whisper: "Marjorie!" The doctor sat down and wrote a letter; and Marjorie, girlishly eager and obedient, had started for Texas, knowing nothing of what lay behind her father's writing, or of what lay before her.

Tin Spout had been a rude revelation to her. Its crudeness and ugliness had shocked and repelled her. She had stepped from the comfort of the Pullman into a sea of mud, and from the company of clean, well-dressed passengers into the midst of muddy, rough-looking men. The threats of the fat horseman and the apathy with which the men received the imminent slaughter of the spotted pony, had further shocked her. She had recoiled from the brutality of the scene, and she had flown to the pony's defense with the budding woman's instinct to protect the helpless. And yet all this, the ugliness of the town, the roughness of the men, the whole harshness of the scene, now came back to her blurred and softened. Those few minutes across the table from Tarrant had effaced the shock of her first impressions and left her in a state of strange confusion. What sort of a man was he, to risk his life on the pony for the sake of a jest? The scene recurred to her, vivified in her memory, the spectacle of the maddened animal hurling himself backward, the tall rider apparently crushed beneath him in the splat-

tering mud! And then he was on his feet, he wasn't hurt at all, he——!

Marjorie suddenly looked at her hands and saw the marks of her nails in the palms. She rubbed her hands together to efface the marks, but halfway in the process she stopped abruptly. Would he really attempt to find her at Ranger Falls? How old was he?

His face was hard and lined, but his eyes were young, like a boy's. What color were they, blue or gray? Gray, probably. And he had ordered apples!

Marjorie's handkerchief came suddenly into play to smother the laughter that bubbled to her lips and she looked out of the window to hide her face from her fellow passengers. An eight-horse load of casing was stuck in the muddy road beside the right of way and the horses were balking and plunging. A silk-shirted, muck-splattered youth on the driver's seat forgot his horses while he enthusiastically waved his hat at the face pressed against the Pullman window, and Marjorie flashed him a smile and waved back.

The train rolled on cautiously past the last derrick of the Tin Spout field through the open, unproved territory, where only the wildest of wild-cattlers were represented by an occasional test well, the derrick weirdly lone and skeleton-like in the bleak landscape, and onto the open plains. The oil-boom had smitten the range country and left it temporarily barren. The great herds of cattle were gone from the ranches and only a few steers or cows were gathered around the water tanks. Areas of wheat and corn land lay untilled. The ranch houses presented a deserted appearance. Land and owners were marking time, awaiting the coming of the oil-man's drill. The Rio

Canyado was crossed at a snail's pace, the brown water gurgling hungrily between the ties of the trestle. There was another stretch of weary looking flat lands, then the train climbed a leisurely grade, topped a low ridge with an expanse of rolling country beyond; and at the scene which presented itself Marjorie temporarily forgot Tin Spout and sat up and stared. Far away toward the southern horizon she saw what at first appeared to be a dense forest of charred tree trunks, and beyond that, marvel of marvels! rose what anywhere else she would have concluded were the tops of two modern sky-scrapers. Passengers crowded eagerly to the windows, and the porter volunteered an explanation. The charred tree trunks were the closely cluttered derricks of the Ranger Falls oil field, and the two high buildings beyond it indicated the brand new city which those grimy derricks had so miraculously created.

"Rangeh Falls, Rangeh Falls!

Marjorie made her preparations for alighting in a high state of excitement and anticipation. Would Ranger Falls be like Tin Spout? What questions did she not have to ask her father!

She was the first to alight, hopping down from the Pullman without accepting the porter's proffered help, eagerly searching the crowd for her father. Dr. Dickinson was not in sight, and in her disappointment Marjorie looked round in bewilderment. Her fellow-passengers soon were lost in the thick crowd on the station platform and she was left alone. She saw men looking at her, and she shuddered with disgust at the look in their eyes. Most of them were middle-aged or elderly, their apparel and jewelry and bearing proclaiming their prosperity. Their

faces bore in the main the hard, ruthless expression of professional gamblers; for they were mostly promoters down at the station to look over the potential investors among the Limited's passengers. There were women with hard faces and much paint and jewelry also in the station, and these, too, looked speculatively at the young girl left all alone and bewildered at the train. Marjorie lifted her chin and looked away. The strange conduct of a group of men attracted her attention. They stood with their backs to the train, apparently unconscious of its thundering arrival, or of the clatter of descending passengers. She saw that they were listening with excited intentness to a youth who was reading a telegram aloud. Men hurrying for the train, handbags in hand, were caught by the attraction that absorbed the group and forgot all about the train.

"What's that? They brought in a new well at Tin Spout? Who got it? How much is she doing?"

"Spence Tarrant," repeated the youth with the telegram. "He's just shot his wild cat. Grogan wires it's a little one."

"Have you got Tarrant in your Syndicate, Doc'?" queried a listener.

"Not yet, not yet," spoke an excited voice from the heart of the group.

Marjorie recognized the voice as that of her father. She sprang upon the porter's foot-stool and standing on tiptoes craned her neck to see over the heads of the excited men. At length she picked out her father by his head of white hair, for Dr. Dickinson was bare-headed, his hat was in his hand, and his face was red with excitement as he gesticulated and argued with the men about

him. Through the babble Marjorie caught snatches of her father's sentences.

"Absolutely harmful—bringing in small wells. New day in oil industry.—Small well hurts a field. Mr. Bodine makes that clear.—Petty fool operators like Tarrant —refuse advice from man of his calibre!"

He turned around. There was a glaze of excitement over his eyes; his mouth was working at the corners, and his tie was awry.

"Daddy!" cried Marjorie.

He stared at her for a moment as if in the stupor of a frenzy.

"By George! I nearly forgot," he exclaimed. "Marjie!"

He kissed her and by the swift, perfunctoriness of the kiss the girl sensed how great had been the change in him.

"Your tie is a sight, Daddy," she scolded, and straightened it to hide the effects of the shock which he had dealt her.

"You were held up at Tin Spout, weren't you, Marjie?" he went on swiftly. "Did you hear them talking about a new well up there? Of course not! It hadn't been shot then—— Well, well! I hope you will enjoy yourself here, Marjie. It's a wonderful country; most wonderful section of the country. Greatest opportunities. Attracts the best men. Wonderful men. Business geniuses, like Mr. Bodine.—Did you stand the trip well, Marjie?" He looked at her with an expression of appraisal which made her uncomfortable. "By George, yes!" he said admiringly. "Come, we'll go to the hotel."

Marjorie followed him in something of daze. He was changed so! The thoughtful, even absent-minded phy-

sician, the grave but considerate father, were gone. His gravity had become a manner which approached close to pompousness, and his considerateness was submerged in the greed which swayed him, which brought the hungry look into his eyes and about his fine, strong mouth.

"Daddy!" she cried at the sight of the great car which awaited them. "Don't tell me you've gone and bought *that!*"

"Don't you like it?" asked the doctor.

Marjorie contemplated the vastness, the lurid red body, the gilt and nickel trimmings, the ornate chauffeur of the car.

"It looks like a circus advertisement," she decided.

"It is Mr. Bodine's car," said Dr. Dickinson. "Get in."

Marjorie's depression increased during the short ride to the hotel. The gorgeousness of the suite into which she was shown did not serve to relieve the mood.

"It's too showy and too rich," she said after inspecting the rococco embellishments of the room. "Daddy, please —please tell me what it means!"

"It means your old father has finally got into a live game," replied the retired specialist jubilantly. "If you could only appreciate the greatness of this game and the nature of the opportunities—— Pshaw! You don't want to bother your pretty little head about that, do you, Marjie? And quite right, too. You'll want to rest a little and change, won't you?" continued the doctor suddenly looking at his watch. "I've got to run down to the Exchange and have a look at the board. A man has got to keep awake here."

"Father!" she said softly. "You had forgotten you came to the station to meet me."

"That was the man Tarrant's doing!" he exclaimed, entirely insensible to the reproach in her words. "Fooling around with small wells—spoiling the reputation of the field Mr. Bodine is going to operate in." He looked at his watch again. "I must be going. Be back soon."

The door slammed. Marjorie stared at it blankly for a moment. She sank down in a terribly red chair. The chair was so large and the upholstery so rich that she seemed quite lost in it. She huddled together and stared helplessly at the door. Intuitively she felt the contact with the great power which had caught and changed her father so ruthlessly. What was this change, what would this power mean to her? Her life-long reliance upon her father had gone in a few minutes. She no longer felt the old sense of complete security when in his company. He seemed almost a stranger to her! He was not himself, that was the trouble. He was no longer Dr. Warner Dickinson. He was merely a pawn in the clutch of circumstances too strong for him. In her depressed mood Marjorie seemed to feel this clutch reaching forth to menace her. With her confidence in her father suddenly destroyed she felt that she was in a strange land, and alone and helpless. She rose and looked out of a window. Across the street a throng of men were jammed excitedly about a doorway bearing a sign: "Oil Exchange." Her father was the most excited of those present. Marjorie shrank back from the window and sank down again into the ornate red chair.

CHAPTER V

THE shooting of an oil well is an occasion which always draws a crowd of spectators in the oil fields. It is the moment when drama enters into the development of a well. On the whole the process of drilling for oil is dull and monotonous, out of all proportion to its potential drama. From the time when the first great base timbers of the derrick are rolled into place until the final thud of the drilling tools announces the completion of the well the work is tedious. There is perhaps a thrilling moment when, with the tools hung in place and steam in the boiler, the order to "spud in" is given and several tons of steel come thudding down upon the huge steel bit and drive it into the virgin soil. The job has begun.

After that for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four the drilling continues with a monotony broken only by the regular bailing, and perchance by accidents. As the drill bites its way through clay, sand and rock formation the strings of casing follow it. At times the tools are withdrawn to allow the hole to be bailed out. Occasionally the drill breaks and is lost deep down in the bowels of the earth. Then a troublesome fishing job ensues, when the grappling iron and huge harpoonlike tools are lowered into the hole and, if fortune is kind and the skill of the fishers great, the lost tools are brought to the surface. Thereupon the drilling is resumed and continued until the pay sand is reached.

Now the climax approaches. The driller is to receive

the answer to the problem of weeks of toil and his thousands of dollars of investment. The bailings are scanned closely. Boiling water is poured upon the sand, or other tests applied. The oil gambler awaits stoically the turn of the final card. The next few hours may make him rich, they may merely pay for the expense of drilling or they may send him forth, penniless—busted! It is not a game for men with tremulous nerves or faint hearts to play at.

In Tarrant's new well the drill bit had been driven into the pay sand common to the Tin Spout field, a formation so dense that it did not admit a free flow of oil into the hole, and as a consequence the oil shooter was called in.

Tarrant's foreman, a grotesquely tall and attenuated old oilman with shaggy eyebrows, who answered to the single name of Elmer, and Buck, the stocky young driller who wore gaudily striped silk shirts as part of his working apparel, were preparing the wire line for lowering the heavy charge of nitroglycerin into the hole.

"They tell me," said Elmer as he wound the line upon a reel, "that this new Syndicate outfit that's sniffing round is a sure 'nough swell crowd."

"I seen a piece in the Gazette about it," responded Buck. "They've got a fine showing of judges and doctors on their list of investors, and ministers, too."

Elmer chuckled softly in his long, thin throat.

There were few of the duties concerned in practical oil welling, from laying the foundation timbers of a derrick to shooting pay sand with nitroglycerin, that Elmer could not perform acceptably. In his time he had been rig builder, tool dresser, engineer, derrick man, platform man, driller, teamster and cook. In a pinch it was rumored he had posed as geologist for an innocent investor, and the

anticline upon which he had located the innocent's well had proved upon drilling to be as surely located directly above a streak of oil sand as if it had been located by a geologist with a string of letters after his name.

He had spent many years in every important field in the country. He had participated in bringing in wells which had created a flock of new millionaires; he had seen salt water and dry holes turn highest hopes into total ruin. He was still working for wages, for he could do almost anything in the oil fields—except make money out of them for himself.

"When them ministerial specimens is laid low by an attack of oil fever they gets it in a most vy-rulent form," said he. "Take the average hombre who's been and had his share of the stings and arrows of good and bad luck, and a case of oil fever just sends him fair-to-middling crazy. He up and stakes all his dinero and his friends' dinero like a little man, and he sits down on the platform and rolls a smoke and says nothing when he sees he's dropped the said dinero into a dry hole. I've seen some mighty odd and instructive sights along that line in my time," said Elmer, leaning forward to inspect a rust spot on the wire.

"I'll say you have," said Buck. "A whopping lot more than any gent with any respect for the truth ever could see."

"There was a hombre set up his rig as a preacher out in the Bakersfield field," continued Elmer undisturbed. "He was as nice a little sin shooter as ever brought the light to an undeserving crew of roughnecks and passed the hat afterwards. Mind you, I ain't saying he was a regular foredoomed and licensed minister, because it came out

afterwards that he wasn't anything but a choir singer who'd set out to do the best he could for himself, but I am saying that when it came to spudding in on a job of sin shooting and hammering away on the stem of salvation Brother Almy was as near to being standard-rig cable tools as benighted roughnecks like you, Buck, are apt to be allowed to see.

"I've seen men cold sober as we be right at this minute throw a twenty into the hat after Brother Almy got through preaching—and no Confed'rate money either. Then Almy'd stuff the dinero into his pockets and thank the boys and say that wasn't what he was after; he was after souls. He certainly was one stiff driller for souls! Not that he did so well that way as with the collection. I've noticed," said Elmer, "that's it's easier to make a gang of roughnecks give up a slice of their pay than to make 'em give up their souls."

"Souls?" scoffed Buck. "Why, Elmer, it would be a waste to give roughnecks like you a trace of soul."

"Almy hung round this boom camp for some time," Elmer went on serenely, "and some of the boys said he was picking up a little lease here and there with the money he got in the hat, but we never believed it at first because he panned the spirit of greed too strong to look like a victim of oil fever. Then one evening he held a meeting to celebrate how he's brought in a sinner's soul. His victim was a Cousin Jack who hauled nitroglycerin. It seems this Cousin Jack had driven off the road into a gulley and the stuff hadn't let go, so being a Cousin Jack he just naturally went straight to the mourner's bench.

"Brother Almy sure did lay that nitro teamster out lower than a snake's belly. There wasn't anything mean

he didn't say about him. 'But even such as he may be saved if they submit humbly,' says he; and just then, whoosh! a well came in flowing near us and the air was full of noise and the smell of fresh oil. Brother Almy jumped four feet and started running. 'Hey! How about this poor sinner?' says someone. 'Oh, to hell with him!' says Almy. 'That well will go a thousand barrels a day and it's on my lease!' "

There was a moment of silence. Then with brutal indifference Buck said:

"I heard it about a gold camp."

"You—what?" demanded Elmer.

"It's an old one," said Buck. "They were burying a fellow, and the preacher who was a fake like this Almy of yours picked up a handful of dirt to throw on the coffin, and he happened to look at it and run it through his fingers, and then he yelled: 'Sink him some place else! I stake out this claim. This is pay dirt!' "

Elmer completed his task of winding the wire line upon the reel before replying.

"I knew a party by the name of Buck once who was a pretty decent citizen," said he, "but he went up into the old Indian Territory and some woman up and married him. Since then I ain't met no one named Buck who was anywheres near human."

"Here's the boss," interrupted Buck as Tarrant approached.

"She's all set, Spence," said Elmer when Tarrant came up to the well. "Jim Hennessy can come any time——"

He stopped suddenly, for he saw that his employer was not listening. Tarrant had halted abruptly and was looking across the platform in the direction of the slush pool.

Elmer slowly followed the direction of his eyes and saw that Tarrant was looking hard at a swarthy-faced man with a scar on one side of his face. The man was examining the contents of the slush pool, where the bailings from the well had been poured, with the air of an interested expert. Also, he had between his thin lips a lighted cigarette.

Tarrant went softly across the platform.

"I'd be obliged," said he quietly, "if you would not smoke."

Grogan turned, and deliberately took the cigarette from his mouth. He looked at Tarrant and raised the cigarette toward his lips. There was a tigerish movement on Tarrant's part, an oath of surprise from Grogan, and the lighted cigarette went flying into a near-by mud puddle. From Tarrant's barely parted lips issued softly the single word: "Travel!"

Grogan's face was a revelation. It seemed as if Tarrant's action had stripped a mask from him. His eyelids were narrowed to slits. There was no mistaking the light in the eyes behind them. His hands moved toward his hips and stopped.

"Fellow," came Tarrant's voice icily, "you are nominating yourself to get hurt—*bad!*"

The scarred man seemed to debate with himself for a few seconds. Finally he drew back, a sneering smile on his lips.

"They told me you were hard," he said mockingly. "All right. You have sure declared yourself."

Elmer's shaggy white brows were drawn far down over his eyes as he watched the stranger move away.

"A killer!" he muttered.

"That breed has gone out of fashion," contradicted Buck.

"So have rattlesnakes," retorted Elmer. "Don't I know the breed? There's poison in the air round that hombre."

"There is something about him, too," continued the old man slowly; "a quarter Spaniard is about how he's bred. I suspect I have seen him somewhere before."

"Been in jail with him somewhere probably," suggested Buck.

"Might be," agreed Elmer. "No, it don't seem like that either. He's an oilman. Did you see him size up the slush? I've seen that jasper in some oil field."

"Probably when you were drilling on Mars," put in Buck.

"Do they *habla Espanol* on Mars, Buck?"

"They might. Why?"

"Wherever it was I saw that hombre he was talking Spig," muttered Elmer. "It must have been down in Old Mexico. But I've seen him some place shore 'nough, and I'm gambling wherever he was there was trouble."

A motor car with a body resembling that of a small delivery wagon, the whole painted a vivid red, came rumbling along the muddy road toward the well. It jolted and lurched through the ruts and pitch holes of the road like any of the other insignificant mud-covered machines which were being driven that way, but at its approach the other machines, no matter how fast, hurried to pull wide to allow it to pass. At the well its appearance was the signal for the spectators to retreat precipitately to a safe distance. The reason was apparent when the car drew near, for on its sides was painted in huge letters: "Nitroglycerin."

Hennessy, the well shooter, swung off the road and came jolting over the rough ground toward the derrick.

"I'm a little late," he said. "A fool service-car man swung out of the garage as I was passing and hit me there." He pointed to a badly damaged mud guard. "Thought for awhile I'd have to fight him to make him pay up."

He produced a long tin shell from his car and hooked it to the wire line over the casing. From the cloth-lined frames in the box of his car he carried a number of tin cans and poured their contents into the shell. The liquid which he poured resembled harmless sirup, but the careful manner in which Hennessy lowered the filled shells to the bottom of the well told what the stuff was. The charge was then tamped by pouring a quantity of water on top of the shell, and the crew with Buck and Elmer ran for safety.

Tarrant followed, leaving Hennessy alone by the charged well. The shooter glanced about to make sure no one had remained within the zone of danger. Then he lighted the fuse, dropped the go-devil down the hole and ran.

There was a period of complete silence. Presently from the top of the hole came a report, no louder than a pistol shot. And then the earth shook for rods round. There was a shriek of wind, as of a pent-up hurricane striving to vent its roar through an eight-inch hole. A roar that seemed to approach from far off mingled its deep bass with the deafening shriek. The roar came nearer, and with it rose the crescendo of whistling air. And the roar grew louder. It seemed like the voice of some great beast growling inarticulately. Louder and louder it grew,

deeper and deeper its tone, until the deafening whistle was drowned in the rising volcano of noise.

And then, with a final roar the rising flood of oil and water flung itself out of the casing head. It splattered the derrick and platform. The air was filled with the odour of fresh oil. For a moment hope ran high. And then the rising column descended to a disappointing trickle. The oil flowed weakly over the head of the casing, and that was all.

The disappointing result of the shot seemed to make no impression on Tarrant.

"We'll let her blow herself out, same as if she was a real oil well," he said quietly to the crew.

"She may do something good on the jack," consoled Hennessy.

"She'll yield enough to give me what I am after," said Tarrant easily.

"What's that?"

"Money enough to drill my new wild-cat," replied Tarrant. "That's what I was after."

CHAPTER VI

"YOU can do a lot better than waste your time that way," interjected Wayne. "Wild-catting is a darn poor way for a man to spend the proceeds from his producing wells."

"You think it is, do you, Wayne?" said Tarrant mildly.

"I know it is," retorted Wayne. "Wild-catting is all right if you can't do anything better. It used to be all right here. It isn't any more. There's an opportunity for something a thousand times better showing itself.

"Here is this little well that you have brought in," he went on. "How much time and worry did you put into it, and how much will it bring you in? Figure it up. If you had fifty or sixty of them on the jack I'm not saying it wouldn't amount to something worth while. Do you ever expect to have that many pumpers here? No, you're darn whistling you don't. You know better. What's the answer then? Figure up everything you've got, and your new wildcat and everything, and what have you got for prospects? Darn little and darn slow, and nothing big to look forward to. That is what this field means—that's absolutely all—if we keep working here as we have been doing.

"I tell you, Spence, there isn't enough money in that game," he concluded vehemently. "This field isn't good enough the way we're playing it. And here Mr. Bodine comes through with the big idea."

"What is his idea?" said Tarrant.

"Organisation, consolidation, control," replied Wayne promptly.

"I know, but what's his game?" said Tarrant.

"I am trying to explain."

"I mean his own personal game? Is he an oilman, a financier or what?"

"Bodine is a big man," said Wayne. "Big ideas, big vision. It takes a man like him to see what this field needs."

"What it needs," said Tarrant, "is a man who is good enough oilman to hit the big pool we are all drilling for."

"And not finding," snapped Wayne.

"Not yet," agreed Tarrant.

"Not even a sign of it," said Wayne.

"Not a sign yet."

"And Bodine comes here with a proposition which is just as big as the big pool would be if we hit it," continued Wayne. "A hundred-million-dollar proposition. He can swing it. Don't worry about that. He can swing any deal he takes hold of. They don't come too big for him. I know how he got his start. He used to be a gambler. He doesn't make any bones about it. He was busted, flat as a roughneck after two days in town. All he had was an accident policy and a revolver. That was enough.

"He was cleaning the revolver one day and it went off. Understand? Shot himself through his left hand. He collected $1500 for it on his policy. With $1200 of that he got a thirty-day option on a little refinery. Then he went to New York to raise some money. It took him about two days to pick out his man—one of the real big guns up there. Bodine trailed him to a restaurant and accidentally knocked over his man's cocktail, apologised,

introduced himself, got invited to sit down, and came away with backing of a hundred thousand dollars. In a few weeks Bodine had the hundred thousand as working capital and the New Yorker had some stock.

"Now, Tarrant, how in the name of calm, cold business sense do you expect to buck a man like that? Why should you want to buck him? He's a star. He's the next big man in the oil business in this country. Do you know what a chance we have got—us small operators here? He wants us with him. We have got a chance to be Bodine's partners!"

"And that hard-boiled party, name of Grogan," said Tarrant, "I suppose we have got a chance to be his partner, too?"

"Oh, Grogan doesn't amount to anything," replied Wayne impatiently. "He's merely Bodine's confidential man. The Pan-National will have a big pay roll when they get going. Bodine will need a man like Grogan to watch things."

"Well, I will say he is a good one for that kind of a job," agreed Tarrant.

"Every man that Bodine picks is a good one for his job," broke out the other enthusiastically. "I tell you, Spence, he's a wonder. Look at Doctor Dickinson; he threw up a fine society practice on the North Side in Chicago to join Bodine. If men like that can afford to be his partners I guess we can. I tell you he'll make millionaires of all of us."

"Wayne," drawled Tarrant, "did you ever hear about what happened to the jack rabbit that went into partnership with the coyote? The coyote had one good meal."

"It's better to be in a big combine like this than to be

on the outside when they've gobbled the whole field," retorted Wayne.

"Is that what they are after here?"

Wayne nodded. "They plan on a big scale," he explained.

"I'm not afraid of that 'gobbling' idea," said Tarrant. "This country is too big to be gobbled up. They might grab a lot of it, but there's always room beyond the horizon for the man who has the backbone to strike off for himself. Why, man, I've been gobbled up so often in my checkered career that it does not scare me at all. Up in the Cushing field I was gobbled so hard they took my rig away. Over in Louisiana they had me working as a driller. These little wells I'm getting now are stake money, Wayne. I'll get a real oil well with the stakes they give me. Sabe the game as I play it?"

"You're a natural-born wildcatter on a big scale, that's all," said Wayne.

"All right, Wayney!" laughed Tarrant. "And I'll come back and say you're a good little fellow, but you're running with the wrong herd."

"This herd, as you call it, has brains enough at least to turn a cheap field into a great financial proposition," retorted Wayne.

"I don't know so much about the financial end of it," said Tarrant, "but I'm kidding myself that I do know something about getting oil in this field. I put in a lot of years learning the game and hunting for the sort of structure that looked good to me, and this little field is it. I haven't brought in anything big yet, but on the other hand you'll notice I don't drill many dry holes or get into salt water often. I will hit it big here. I'll do it or I'll go

broke so hard there won't be much left. No; Bodine is after sucker money——"

"Hold on, Spence! He's after consolidation that will make the field an inviting investment proposition," interrupted Wayne.

"Sucker money, I said, and I'll let her lay," persisted Tarrant. "That's all right, too, if that's what you're after. There's enough of them running round loose yearning for somebody to take it away from them. Personally, I'm too much interested in the oil-well business to have any interest left over for the easy-money game. I am after oil. There's more of it round here than we've touched so far. I'm hunting for that big pool."

"Yes, and if it could be found you would find it," said Wayne. "That's why we want you with us."

Tarrant's eyes searched his with a sudden flash.

"Us, eh?" he said, and was silent.

Wayne looked away, chewing his cigar.

"You've thrown in with Bodine, then?" said Tarrant quietly. "I don't remember your telling me."

"I was going to tell you, Spence," protested Wayne. "There wasn't time. I had to get in at once or not at all. It was too big a chance to overlook. My wife wanted me to do it, too. As she said, we weren't getting along very fast, and this was our chance for big money."

"I suppose it does make a difference if you are married," said Tarrant thoughtfully.

"It makes a difference to have a bonanza offered you," said Wayne.

"And Bodine has got your lease, I reckon?"

"Not at all. It is part of the Pan-National Syndicate holdings, and I'm an officer in the company. I traded a

gamble for a sure thing. Spence, you must do the same thing: trade a gamble for a sure thing."

Tarrant leaned back against the derrick and smiled.

"Wayne, if it wasn't for the gamble I doubt if I'd be in the oil game," he said. "It's the gamble that makes it what it is. That's what gets me. We are spudding in Well No. 5 out on my wildcat lease south of town. What will the drill hit? Will it be pay sand, salt water or nothing? Don't talk to me about a sure thing financially! Man, I've seen and heard my own oil drumming against the crown block, and that's what I am hoping to hear again."

"Go down to Ranger Falls and talk with Bodine, Spence," broke out Wayne. "I can't convince you, I see that. He can. He'll make you see you can't afford to stay out. He asked me to invite you to a conference with him."

"Did he?" said Tarrant. "That was friendly of him, at least."

He pondered a moment, apparently deep in the intricacies of the problem confronting him.

"Wayne," he said casually, "did you say something about a party named Doctor Dickinson down there?"

"Doctor Dickinson is one of the big stockholders in the syndicate," was the prompt reply. "I understand he's put a hundred thousand dollars in."

"I reckon this Doctor Dickinson and Bodine are pretty close then?"

"I should say they are," said Wayne. "The doctor never gets tired of talking about Bodine. He thinks there is nobody like him."

"Does he?" asked Tarrant sharply.

"He certainly does," was the emphatic answer. "I tell

you, Spence, this man Bodine is a wonder. He impresses and attracts everybody he talks to—operators, investors, men or women. He's a born winner. You must go down to the Falls."

"I will," said Tarrant, suddenly. "Yes, I sure will do that little thing."

CHAPTER VII

WHEN the ultimate historian, in the distant future, completes the record of the forces which have assisted in determining and molding the character of this country his labors will be incomplete unless he appreciates the importance of the story of the oil booms of the Southwest. Climate, soil, and resources, material and human, serve to create the fires from which rises the spirit which men speak of as the soul of a nation. How could the spirit of a nation be anything but one of overweening optimism when the earth itself turns out surprises and millions beyond the wildest dreams of its people?

The oil craze was one of the outbursts of colossal, raw forces which, like mighty, unknown springs suddenly welling forth, ever and anon burst into the current of American life, expanding, accelerating, unsettling and finally molding the destiny of her people. The fertile farm lands of the central area, the precious metals of the West, the timber of the North, each had its day, its fire, its hammer and anvil to beat upon the metal of the nation. The oil force comes most recently of all; its importance and influence are yet to be determined.

Beneath soil upon which farmers and ranchers toiled ceaselessly for a scant livelihood there lay hidden the force which was to revolutionize life in this section of the country. As always happens the hidden resource in time finds the men for its purpose. The right men came to the oil fields, and suddenly the mode of life there was upset, galvanized; the old discarded and thrown away, the new

entered upon hecticly. The land was filled with a horde of little machines panting for gasoline. Crude oil leaped in price until old-time operators doubted their eyes. The broad, rolling sweep of the oil-field country, illimitable as the untrammeled sea, was suddenly covered with men of a type too vital for the slower industries, too energetic for reflection. By the thousands they came, translating the energy of the American spirit into fabulous accomplishment, tearing into the bowels of the earth where the oil lay hidden.

The country saw a torrent of galvanic force come pouring forth, carrying humans away on its flood, some to wreck and ruin, some to unbelievably great and easy fortunes. It spread across the land. In its wake rose modern cities, skyscrapers, gilded hotels, smoky industries, crudely sybaritic homes, boulevards. In its wake men would lie ruined and broken; on its crests some would ride to material glory. It was not theirs to say. The oil determined their fate. It was the force, a power which none could resist, a thick, black torrent of liquid gold, bearing all men in its path on to strange destinies.

The city of Ranger Falls was one of the dramatic manifestations of this force. Man of his own free will would not have selected it as a site for a city. The location was far from logical. Far from the natural flow of population, it had long existed in its environment of poor soil as a dejected cattle town. Climate and water were equally unfavorable; and the Rio Canyada, trickling over a two-foot ledge to give the place its name, was at times a muddy streak through the prairie; or, after cloud-bursts, a raging, impassable torrent. But there was oil beneath that barren topsoil, and a city rose out of the cow town. Where, a

few years before, lean, brown-faced riders had tied their wiry ponies to a well-chewed hitch rail, a hundred motor cars, ranging from small service cars to glistening limousines, were parked at the proper angle decreed by the traffic committee of the Chamber of Commerce. There was gilt on the uniforms of coloured elevator men in the office buildings, and the gilded youth of the town were wearing slim-waisted coats belted in the back.

Tarrant had known the Falls when it was what it would have continued to be till sunk in the dust of time save for the oil boom, but he found the new city more to his liking. A tub bath was a relief from the necessary daily showers at the well, and the service at the barber shop and the food in the dining room of the Jake Stringer House were gratifying after weeks in the field. Night was drawing on when, carefully refreshed and groomed, he seated himself in the lobby and looked about.

Jake Stringer had erected the hostelry that bore his name out of the first million dollars of his oil royalties. It was twelve stories from lobby to roof garden, and the governor's suite had as deep carpets as any room in New York. Guests sat in their rooms and dropped a dime in a slot and an electric fan soothed the fevered brow for thirty minutes by the clock. Smoothly gliding elevators, operated by attendants in maroon and gilt, whisked one up to the roof where a coloured orchestra produced jazz, or down to a gilded lobby where a white orchestra on a balcony functioned similarly. "Silk shirts laundered at owner's risk" warned a red line on the laundry slips; and Jake Stringer sat on a rocking chair in the lobby with a fly bat in his fat hands and killed flies. This constituted his work and his recreation.

"Always wanted to," he explained. "Never hada chance before. Darn it!" as he missed. "I'll get him yet!"

The supply of flies never diminished, so Jake was quite content with his famous establishment.

"Evening, Spence, evening," greeted Stringer, as he saw Tarrant.

"Hello, Jake," said Tarrant. "Killing many this evening?"

"Oh, tol'able, Spence, tol'able," replied the boniface. "I——" Swish! "Darn that old bluebottle! Fooled me twice now. Say, Spence, you know that option of yours on my section of the old 88 Ranch up northwest of you is pretty nigh petering out, don't you?"

"Want to buy it back, Jake?" asked Tarrant instantly.

"Who? Me? Me——" The proprietor of the Jake Stringer House paused to miss another fly—"me buy back that damn wildcat territory? I ain't crazy yet, even if certain other parties are."

"Who, for instance?" demanded Tarrant.

"That"—swish!—"new Pan-National Syndicate," replied Stringer. "They're a pack of hungry lease hounds if there ever was one."

Tarrant considered a moment. The tract under consideration adjoined the Tin Spout field on the northwest, and was such rank wildcat territory that Tarrant had acquired an option on the lease which Stringer held on the section when he first began to operate in the Tin Spout field, just as he had secured other options and leases which were available. His efforts to locate the great pool of oil, which his geological knowledge, experience and faith told him must lie somewhere in the Tin Spout field, had so far

proved unavailing, and he had sold several leases and let various options lapse to acquire capital to continue drilling. There had been no market for the 88 Ranch option save at a losing figure, so he had held on. It was one of the gambles which oil operators make as a matter of course, and he had come to regard it as a probable loss. With the news that someone else had queried concerning it the tract instantly rose in value.

"Does the Syndicate want it?" he asked.

"So far as I can make out, Spence," replied Stringer, "that Syndicate wants everything up there they can get hold of."

"Did they make you an offer?"

"I didn't give them a chance," was the response. "They wouldn't offer anything worth sneezing at now, but by the time your option runs out there ought to be a market for everything up there, if they make their boom good. I wouldn't renew even with you, Spence. I've got sixty days after your option expires to renew in, and I expect I'll be able to do some right smart dickering in those same sixty days. We're friends, Spence, so I wanted to remind you. You look sharp when your option expires if you expect to renew. I'm not playing any favourites then, and I'm telling you it will be first come first served."

"If I'm wanting it then I'll aim to be first," said Tarrant.

"Then you'll have to step pretty," Stringer retorted, as he rose to go, "because if it comes to a race I'm telling you you're hooked up with some mighty fast company."

Tarrant was glad when Stringer had gone. He had not come to Ranger Falls to talk about oil leases. In fact he had not come on oil business at all. He had come be-

cause the girl who had spoken up for Nine Spot was at Ranger Falls. A hunger had grown in his heart for another sight of her young beauty. There had been little beauty in his life. A career in the oil fields, especially if one has a penchant for wildcatting, is not apt to bring one in contact with aught that is not rough and hard and ugly.

Tarrant had worked in many oil fields. He had fought with mother earth and her mud and rock and water to drive his drill down to where the pay sand lay. Inevitably he had fought with other men, men bent on the same performance, or upon hindering him or acquiring the proceeds of his labours. And he had fought with fate, the whimsical fate of the oil fields, which inspires, tantalises, enriches and ruins.

A battering sort of existence. But Tarrant had not become battered within. The blows which fate dealt him had left no dents. Instead they had served only to harden the steel temper of his being. From a grinning care-free rider of the Texas ranges he had, under the tension of his oil experiences, become toughened and saturnine. Still young enough and fresh enough to know the wild rompings of a cowboy's heart, he had developed a degree of external hardness and control which marked him for the grim oil gambler that he was. Long hours on the crown block and platform, beneath the broiling Texas sun, had given his face and neck and hands a thick coating of dull red, as if to assist in the protective shell of hardness which he was developing; and after the manner of his kind, he hid this hardness under a mask of ready smiles, of drawled jests and stories and laughter.

He was sensible of the hardening process, however. Somewhere in him there was bred a strain of delicacy

which craved something finer than life so far had offered him. As he struggled with the muck and grime of well drilling he dreamed. The women who followed the oilmen into fields had no place in these dreams. In fact it was not until the day he saw the clean, blue-eyed girl with the fair hair step into his field of vision that he discovered that his dreams might have an embodiment.

A hunger had awakened in him as he looked at her, and it had grown. She was at Ranger Falls, and he was determined to see her again.

"Young man, are you an oilman?"

Tarrant started from his dreams as a man seated himself in the next chair and boomed the words into his ear. The newcomer was portly and middle aged. His apparel and demeanour proclaimed him a prominent citizen, and moreover, one who was entirely appreciative of his position.

"I have not been in Texas long," said he, "but I flatter myself I can recognize the different types when I see them. You, I think, are an oilman."

Tarrant breathed hard before replying.

"Yes, sir," said he.

"In the oil game, eh!" beamed the newcomer.

"Yes, sir."

"It is a great game, young man."

Tarrant offered no response, but his demeanour plainly expressed a willingness to allow the conversation to end.

"What I want to know," continued the stranger, "is just how you know there's oil down there?"

"You do?" said Tarrant, and in the mildly rising inflection the prosperous one, had he been observant, had he been trained to see or hear anything but the most obvious

—in short, had he been anything but what he was—might have caught a hint to warn him that this quiet young man was not a simple young man, but being rather well immured in the shell of his own self-importance the man was entirely impervious to any such impression; and he moved himself nearer fraternally.

"Yes. For instance, you're going to drill a new well. Got your stock out, and so on. Now, tell me this: how do you know there is oil down there?"

Tarrant deliberated, apparently allowing this forcefully delivered question to sink home.

"Down where, sir?" he asked mildly.

"In the ground." The important citizen's pudgy forefinger impatiently indicated the floor. "How do you know it is there?"

"We don't," said Tarrant.

"You don't? Then how do you know where to drill? What methods do you use in locating your wells?"

"Well, different companies use different methods," was the reply.

"Employ geologists. I know that, of course."

"Most do. That's the accepted way of locating wells. Yes, sir, that's the way." Once more Tarrant's tone implied that perhaps this was as good a place as any to terminate the conversation, but the prominent citizen would have none of it.

"What other methods are there?" he demanded, and the die was cast.

"Oh, there are lots of other methods," replied Tarrant. "Some folks still stick to the old peach twig."

"I've heard of superstitious people hunting water that

way," said the stranger. "Water witches, they used to call them. Superstitious nonsense——"

"Yes," interposed the young man, "but that was a different kind of twig."

"Diff——"

"Yes, sir. You see, when they first came down here and began hunting oil that way they found their water twigs wouldn't work. They'd walk over a lease and the twig would twist, and when they'd drill they wouldn't hit anything but water. So they set out to develop what they call the oil peach—the Petroleum Perfection, to call it by its right name. You've probably heard of it, sir?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"They just grow them for the twigs. Fellow over in Arkansas has got a whole ranch planted to them. Sends his children to college and drives round in an eight-cylinder car, all just on growing those twigs. He fertilises with crude petroleum, that's his secret. The trees are black and oily, and they run the fruit through a presser and get pretty fair low-gravity crude out of them. Of course, twigs grown that way would naturally point to oil instead of water and you see—that's the idea."

The prominent citizen's eyes began to bulge. Men began to gather round who knew Tarrant. They listened solemnly.

"That's a new one to me," admitted the stranger.

"Yes, sir," agreed the young man, with a simple shake of his head, "it's a great game."

"What are the other methods you spoke of?"

"Outside of geological location and twigs, you mean? Well, there's some companies use the patent clock. You've heard of that, I reckon. It's a patent a fellow down in the

Corsicana field got out. Something like an alarm clock. Do you know what an anticline is, sir? Well, it's a geological term; anticlines and domes are what you look for. Well, this clock is rigged up to find them. It's mighty sensitive. You take and put it on a thin copper plate so as to have a good conductor, and then you drag it slow and easy over your lease. When you get on an anticline she lets go and strikes, like an alarm clock getting you up in the morning. Fellow's wife left him, that invented them. She was a Kaintucky girl and they didn't get along."

The prominent citizen now began to comprehend. That last irrelevant touch about the inventor's matrimonial affairs had done the work. Sort of a fool this young fellow was. Strange, there was something rather shrewd about his face, too.

"Well, young man," he burst forth in kindly fashion, "I hope you don't utilise either of those haphazard methods in locating your wells?"

"No, sir." The young man's countenance lighted up a trifle, probably in gratitude for the older man's solicitude.

"I should think you would find it a rather uncertain business under those circumstances," persisted the stranger.

"Yes, sir, it sure is."

"Rather full of ups and downs, isn't it?"

Tarrant sat up.

"'Ups and downs'! Now you said it. That's what it sure is. Ups and downs, and hard luck."

A certain look of recklessness showed on Tarrant's face. "I ran into a mess of it once that would have surprised you," he said.

The prominent citizen smiled patronisingly.

"I doubt if it would have surprised me," said he, crisply, "considering what I've heard. What was it?"

"A big well we brought in," replied Tarrant. "A gusher. It certainly was a real old-fashioned spouter."

"What was the hard luck?"

"Well," said Tarrant, "it was one of those things that will happen in the oil business. That gusher just naturally caught me unawares. We had the hole swabbed out because we were in the pay sand and we were waiting for the nitroglycerin to come so we could shoot her, and then she blew herself in."

"Ah, I see; you weren't prepared for it."

"No, sir, we weren't prepared for it, as you say. Particularly I wasn't. I was sitting right over the casing. A fellow is apt to do that, you know, after a long hard job. That gusher came in without a whistle of gas to warn me, and it just naturally carried me up with it, and the first thing I knew there I was up eighty feet in the air sitting on a solid column of oil with nothing to hang on to.

"Gushers don't flow steady, you know. If it had I would have been fairly well fixed. They come in by heads. One minute I'd be up there eighty feet above the casing head, the next the column would drop until I'd be getting ready to jump; then, swoosh! up I would go again. It got mighty monotonous after three or four hours."

The stranger managed to gasp: "Three or four hours?"

"Of course, when you're shot up like that there's nothing to do but wait until they bring the extension ladder round and pick you off. Regular machine, you know; run it up alongside of the gusher and swing the ladder up to you—I reckon you've heard of them, sir?"

"No," gasped the other faintly, "no!"

"Of course the boys sent off a hurry call for the ladder, but word came back that they'd gone out on three jobs west of us and couldn't possibly figure to get round to me before dark.

"It sure was hard. The boys tried every way to save me. Once when I was down so low Elmer jumped and pretty near got my foot. After that she came stronger, it seemed. The boys did what they figured best, I'll say that for them."

The prominent citizen finally broke the awe-stricken silence.

"Wha-what did they do?"

"Roped me." Tarrant was looking straight ahead, apparently seeing nothing, his countenance a study in unutterable woe.

"Roped you?"

"Yes, it was all they could do. Elmer did it. He used to punch cows in the old days. He—he got him a rope and waited until she was down and then he—he roped—me. Swung his rope and dropped the noose over my shoulders pretty as you please and pulled hard."

"Wha—what happened?"

Tarrant leaped up with a gleeful howl and smote the prominent citizen upon the back.

"What happened?" he bellowed joyously. "Why, darn it, old-timer, what could happen? He just naturally yanked me off that column of oil *and broke my neck!*"

The outburst that followed was too much for the pomposity of the victim. He bridled and purpled with outraged dignity.

"That's one on you, doctor!" bellowed an oil operator. "The cigars are on Doctor Dickinson!"

"Dickinson?" gasped Tarrant. "Doctor Dickinson?"

"Who is that young fool?" spluttered Doctor Dickinson.

"That's Spence Tarrant," volunteered a bystander. "He operates up in the Tin Spout field."

"Indeed?" said the doctor. "Tarrant! Tarrant! I shall not forget him."

CHAPTER VIII

TARRANT was vexed. He was vexed with himself, with Doctor Dickinson and with fate in general. He had not wished to talk about oil. He had not wished to talk at all. The doctor had brought it upon himself. But that was beside the question. He had made an enemy of Doctor Dickinson. There was no mistaking the anger and hatred, bred of offended dignity, that had flushed the doctor's rather full countenance and hardened his eyes. And the doctor was the girl's father!

"Been meeting Doctor Dickinson, Spence?" piped a dry feminine voice at his elbow. "What an elegant man he is, ain't he? And such a lovely daughter as he has got."

Tarrant hid his mood successfully.

"Good evening, Mrs. Stringer," said he, bowing low to the speaker. "You get younger and prettier every day."

Mrs. Stringer flashed the large diamonds upon her fingers. It was only a few years before that Judy Stringer was wearing her life away cooking for Jake Stringer and four hands on the Stringer Ranch, but her jewels and her gowns now came from Fifth Avenue—"New York," as she was careful to add.

"Yes," she retorted good-humouredly, "and my hair gets blacker every day I dye it, too."

"You don't!" groaned Tarrant. "Don't tell me you do."

"Why shouldn't I admit it?" was the response. "Ain't we rich? Of course I dye my hair. And I have my face

massaged every day and I don't eat enough to feed a bird. Think I'm going to have Jake sit here all day and look at young, slim girls, and then come home to a gray-haired, fat old woman? Not while Judy Stringer has a tiny piece of brain left working."

"But you are dazzling to-night," continued Tarrant solemnly. "Don't tell me, Judy, you get yourself up like this every night?"

"All lit up like a plush horse, ain't I, Spence?" she laughed, regarding her gown and jewels with complacency. "I may not be any vamp, but I guess I ain't so hard to look at, if you wear smoked glasses."

"I'm telling you straight, Judy," said the young man, "the only thing that keeps me from shooting Jake and kidnapping you is the fact that Jake is my friend."

"Now ain't that nice of you to say that?" chuckled the lady. "Spence, you do tell the nicest lies. That's what women like. Hey! What are you talking about being dressed up? Man, you're dressed up fit to kill, your black self!"

"I was figuring I'd meet you," persisted Tarrant.

"Jake, come here and listen; I want you to get jealous."

"It's too hot," muttered Jake, "too damn hot."

"There you are," said Mrs. Stringer resignedly. "What's the use?"

"Doctor Dickinson stopping here?" asked Tarrant casually.

"You don't think there is any other place in town fit for a man like the doctor to stop at, do you?" was the prompt retort.

"I reckoned there wasn't," said Tarrant. "The doctor

and Bodine and all that crowd, I reckon they all stop here too?"

"Of course," replied Mrs. Stringer. "Mr. Bodine's out of town to-day, so the doctor feels sort of lost."

"You said the doctor had a daughter too?" came the casual remark.

"The loveliest girl I ever laid eyes on," said Mrs. Stringer fervently. "I am entertaining her on the roof to-night myself."

"*Adios* then," said Tarrant quickly; "don't let me keep you."

He watched the honest woman flounce herself into one of the ornate elevators. His heart was beating high again. He waited a short time, then stepped into an elevator and said "The roof."

The elevator shot upward and came to a stop and Tarrant stepped out into a glare of coloured lights and jazz.

"Check your hat, sir."

"Reservation, sir?"

The lights were strung among the artificial vines which wreathed in and out of the trellis-work above and about the place. The head waiter looked upon all guests without reservations with contempt. The jazz orchestra was composed of madmen. In nothing did the Stringer Roof lack the requisites of a successful roof garden.

Tarrant took a table in a corner and ordered luxuriously. Having ordered he rose, lighted a cigarette and strolled about the promenade. At a vine-covered pillar which hid a dark corner he paused and a thrill went through him. A slender figure was standing in the corner peering through the trellis out upon the somber mystery of

a prairie country at nightfall. Her back was toward him, and she was wearing an evening gown, with a cloud of mauve tulle about her shoulders, but Tarrant knew her, and he stopped, his courage suddenly gone.

"Mrs. Stringer," said the girl softly, "what are those funny little lights twinkling way off there?"

"Those are derrick lights," said Tarrant gently.

She turned and saw him.

"Why, it's the man who ordered the apples!" she cried.

"My name is Tarrant, Miss Dickinson," said he. "I told you I would see you again."

"Yes," she said, "I remember."

"Thank you," he said gravely, "I hoped you would remember."

"It was that darling little pony," she explained gayly; "I couldn't forget him."

"The pony didn't say anything about seeing you again, did he?"

"No," she said unabashed, "but I kept thinking of him. That was how I remembered what you said."

"I see," he said gravely. "I hope you have found Ranger Falls more civilized than Tin Spout."

"Well," she said, "it's lovely up here, at least. And to think oil built this!"

"Yes, oil did it all," said Tarrant. "This is the end of the oil game that the public knows about—the money end, the promotion end, the flash of new oil wealth. But look out there." He pointed out through the trellis-work. The soft darkness of the Southwestern night was creeping up from the earth. Beyond the town a constellation of twinkling stars seemed suspended close to the ground.

"Derrick lights," he repeated.

He pointed out the thick clusters of lights in the developed fields and far away the widely scattered lights where the boldest of wildcatters were drilling test wells.

"That is the real oil game," he said. "Out there where geologists are giving the best in their brains, and operators the best in their pockets, and roughnecks the best in their bodies, is where the great oil industry is made possible. That is where the production is made, by the real producers. They produce. And out of their work springs all this—and a world of other things besides."

"I should say they do," came the voice of Mrs. Stringer over his shoulder. "What I say is, God may have put that oil there, but it certainly raises the devil when it gets out. Spence, I didn't know you knew Miss Dickinson."

"He does not know her," boomed a voice behind her.

Doctor Dickinson strode forward, led Marjorie to one side and whispered savagely to her. She cast a bewildered look at Tarrant and, taking her father's arm, allowed herself to be led across the floor and out of sight.

"What have you done?" demanded Mrs. Stringer, alarmed at the obvious displeasure of the doctor. And then she had occasion for alarm at the change in Tarrant's expression, for he strode past her grimly silent, his mouth hard, his eyes blazing, his expression nothing in the world but a threat.

"I've always said," she proclaimed as she seated herself at the table with Marjorie and her father, "that you never can tell about men in the oil business. What in the name of Sam has Spence Tarrant done, Doctor?"

Dr. Dickinson had recovered his poise, and the spectacle of Tarrant's discomfiture afforded him considerable satisfaction.

"You know that person, Tarrant, do you, Mrs. Stringer?" he returned.

"Well," said Judy Stringer dryly, "I have a speaking acquaintance with him at least. He used to ride for Jake when we were ranching. What's he done?"

The doctor refused to come to the point so directly.

"Then you are quite familiar with the young man's character—or lack of it, Mrs. Stringer?" said he urbanely.

Mrs. Stringer hesitated. Her first impulse was to flare up in Tarrant's defense, but, as she looked down at her gown, which had come from Fifth Avenue—New York—she realised that her present elevated position forbade her the simple honesty and directness of the ranch days and imposed upon her a certain degree of diplomacy. The social distinctions were making themselves felt in Ranger Falls; Dr. Dickinson was much sought after; and as his hostess Mrs. Stringer had incurred the usual social obligations.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a judge of character, doctor," she perjured herself.

"The young man in question," said Dr. Dickinson, "is rather too wild for polite society. Yes, rather too wild. I am amazed at his effrontery in speaking to Marjie as he did, amazed and indignant."

"He's pretty amazing, Spence is, coming right down to cases," agreed Mrs. Stringer.

"I met Mr. Tarrant at Tin Spout," said Marjorie.

"Who introduced you, Marjie?" asked her father.

"Nobody!" she laughed, brightening a little as she related the tale of Tarrant and the bucking pony.

"And he spoke to you?" persisted her father.

"I spoke first, as I told you," said she. "I spoke to all

of them; I think I scolded them a little. Mr. Tarrant was one of the crowd."

She did not relate, however, how he had asserted his determination to seek her out at Ranger Falls. Dr. Dickinson studied her closely as her countenance lighted up with youthful excitement as the thrilling scene came back to her, and his lips drew together in the same ruthless lines as Marjorie had observed on the faces of some of the men at the station. It hurt her to see that look on her father's face. He was—he had been—too fine a father, too fine a man to allow himself to grow mean and hard like that.

"I suggest that we change the subject," said he coldly. "I do not care to go into details—rather, it is impossible to go into details—but I have recently come into possession of certain knowledge concerning this man—this Tarrant—which places him quite beyond the pale. Marjorie, you must remember that you are not at home, but in a strange place where, although most of the people are very fine, there are a few who are not only impossible but dangerous, viciously dangerous. One must be careful here. I am sure Mrs. Stringer will agree that I am right?"

"I reckon you are, Doc'," replied that worthy lady cautiously.

"Especially must a girl like you be careful, Marjie," continued the doctor. "There are reckless characters here—terribly reckless."

"But don't you worry, honey," assured Mrs. Stringer, watching the girl's face. "You got your pa to look after you. You're all right."

"Yes!" Marjorie looked up at her father with a smile

breaking over her countenance. "Yes." The smile faded abruptly. What was in her father's mind? Why was he appraising her with that strange expression on his face, an expression she had never seen there before? Why did it fill her with a sense of helplessness, of danger? What did it mean?

CHAPTER IX

TARRANT returned to his table and dined in apparent content. Friends and acquaintances, seeing him sitting alone, tendered him invitations to join their parties, but he steadfastly declined. The best of him was stirred and troubled. The moment alone with the girl had blessed him and cursed him at the same time. His spirit had risen to the call of the vision she presented. Her beauty and what lay in the depths of her eyes, had given him a glimpse of something finer than he had known. It had whetted the hunger in his heart. He knew there would be no contentment for him in his old life after this. The slip of a girl had suddenly become more significant in his eyes than all the oil wells in the world. He cursed himself for a half-baked fool. Why had he been so reckless as to pull the stranger's leg without considering his identity? He had made a hopelessly bad impression upon her father, who obviously had passed his impression on to the girl.

Tarrant paid his check, tipped lavishly after the manner of oilmen, and descended to the street. It was deep night by now. The vast darkness of the illimitable prairies had closed about the town, surrounding it and rolling up unlighted streets like a foreboding wall which shut out Ranger Falls from visible relationship with any other portion of the earth. Main Street and its lights alone repelled the darkness, a tiny scar of incandescence in a sea of night. Here and there tiny twinkles gleamed impo-

tently on derrick tops, where the night towers were pounding away through the dark hours, and high above them in the soft Southwestern sky the stars looked down, a hint of the vastness of the universe, of the insignificance of man and his works.

"Man, you look glum," spoke a soft voice at Tarrant's side. "You must have hit salt water up at Tin Spout."

"Hello, Arkansaw," greeted Tarrant, recognising the slight figure of the young gambler who was widely known in the oil fields. "Running a game here?"

"Trying to, Spence," replied the youngster. "Things have livened up a little lately."

"How come?"

"Well, that new Pan-National Syndicate crowd hasn't hurt any," was the dry reply.

Tarrant became alert at once, though not even Arkansaw's sharp eyes could detect the change in his mood.

"They play a little, do they?" he asked casually.

"A little," agreed the gambler with a slight smile.

"Many of them?" asked Tarrant.

"Oh, so, so," replied Arkansaw. "The head of the works is the live wire, though. He certainly does play a stiff game."

"Who is that?" queried Tarrant indifferently.

"Mr. Bodine, the president," said the gambler. "Yes, sir, he sure 'nough does shake things up when he sits in."

"Does he sit in often?"

"Every night, Spence. He's got the habit."

Tarrant yawned elaborately.

"I'd like to see one of those plungers at work," said he. "I don't reckon there's any chance, though. I hear Bodine is out of town."

"Yes, but he is coming back on the ten-five," said Arkansaw, "and Old Man Swanson and Piper and a couple others with big wads are in, and Bodine told me to look for him about ten-fifteen."

"I may drift over and look on," said Tarrant.

"Too bad about you looking on," said Arkansaw with a grin. "Are you well hooked up? If you aren't I'll stake you."

"Thanks, Arkansaw," replied Tarrant. "I reckon I've got enough to look in."

Tarrant's course when he eventually moved to find the nefarious establishment of young Arkansaw led him away from the lights and crowds of Main Street down a dark side street which was near the railway station. A new brick building with a Greek restaurant occupying the first floor attracted his attention. He went leisurely round to the rear and entered a tiny hallway. No lights were visible anywhere about the rear of the building. So far as external evidences were concerned the place was deserted.

Tarrant put his left hand on the wall and carefully moved down the hallway until in the Stygian darkness therein his feet found the first step of a narrow staircase. Still retaining touch of the wall with his hand he mounted slowly, his right hand extended before him. When his hand came in contact with a door he fumbled until he found a dangling rope and pulled. No sound or effect apparently rewarded the effort, but Tarrant stood still. Presently a slight grating noise was heard and a hole of light the size of a man's hand appeared in the center of the door. Tarrant placed his face close to the hole. The

door opened and he stepped in and closed the door behind him.

There were four tables in the brilliantly lighted room, all devoted to the reprehensible diversion of gambling with cards. At one a neat, white-haired old reprobate sat quietly drawing cards out of a small metal box, thereby holding the rapt attention of the three patrons of the faro layout. The next table was devoted to the form of entertainment variously known as *vingt et un,* twenty-one, or black jack, the latter being the name under which it was played here. The third table held an engrossed group of draw-poker players, a house man sitting in to care for the establishment's interests in the game.

Arkansaw presided personally over the fourth table. From the evidence, which consisted of chips and cards, it might have been supposed that this table was devoted to the sinful and deleterious diversion of playing poker. It is said, however, that there is a degree of sanity and reason—some have asserted there is science—to be enjoyed by the participants in a game of poker, and in the nerve-racking pastime which Arkansaw superintended there was exactly such sanity and reason and science as might be experienced in a duel with sandbags in the dark. The game flourished here under the descriptive appellation of Crazy Sue, and it was further described as "seven-card stud, table stakes, deuces and joker running wild."

Seated at the table were a member of Congress, a mule skinner with a yellow diamond in his red shirt, a New York banker, a lawyer, a railway manager, the head of the local bootlegging combine, and a white-haired, red-faced oil millionaire known as Old Man Swanson.

"Tarrant—Tarrant!" greeted this individual explo-

sively. "Here you are—sit down. Don't give a demn for expense; going to have a good game here to-night!"

"Swanson," said Tarrant as he seated himself, "what part of Sweden do you come from?"

"North Dakota!" responded Swanson promptly.

"I wanted to know," continued Tarrant, "so if I ever went foreign I'd know where not to go. Venerable, white-haired man like you inviting promising young men to join you in your descent into Avernus! You ought to be ashamed."

"You bet!" agreed the millionaire heartily.

"Young man," said the congressman, "this is a serious offense against the laws of the state. Will you give us your money quietly or must we take steps?"

"Deal the cards," said the skinner tersely.

Men who play Crazy Sue with their entire rolls as the limit for a single bet have no scattering interests, no idle words after the cards begin to fall. Conversation ceased. Men bet, passed, dropped out, or called with a monosyllabic economy of language. At first an occasional chuckle or an oath was to be heard from the table, but as the game developed its tenseness became such as to forbid even the briefest of exclamations. Mouths grew pursed and eyes narrowed. Each player's hat slipped gradually forward, shading his countenance, and Arkansaw settled the green eye-shade of his calling more closely over his brows.

Tarrant won from the beginning. The deuces seemed to gravitate to him, and usually they were hidden so the strength of his hands was not exposed. A run of luck in that game sometimes meant a fortune, for the players one and all were there solely for the thrill of gambling.

Tarrant's original roll doubled and trebled. He did not pause to estimate his winnings, but with his own roll left them on the table as his stake.

The railroad man, cleaned out, rose and left the room. An oil operator, seeing the size of the pile before Tarrant, took the vacant seat. The congressman lost the thousand dollars he had brought and departed. An oilman took his place. Swanson, who had lost more than anyone, cashed a check and kept his seat. Tarrant had over eight thousand dollars as winnings when Arkansaw rose at the flash of a red light to open the door for a tall, heavy man whom he greeted as Bodine. The bootlegger, whose seat was opposite Tarrant, promptly rose and cashed in.

"All right, Sam," said Bodine crisply and took the vacated chair.

Tarrant, in the act of dealing, glanced casually across the table.

"Are you in?" said he, and allowed his eyes to rest on Bodine.

"I am," said Bodine.

Tarrant dealt a card to each player and waited. While he did so he shot another glance at Bodine. To his surprise the big promoter was looking at him steadily, but he in no wise permitted this to interfere with his scrutiny of the man. He recognised in Bodine a man of great force, of boldness and native power. The promoter was one of the type which is produced so often among the high executives of industry, large of body and bone, round or square of head, surcharged with vitality, and concealing a primitive ruthlessness beneath an exterior of well-groomed cheerfulness. Bodine smiled fraternally across the table.

"You're Tarrant, aren't you?" he asked.

Tarrant nodded.

"Can I see you at my office at ten to-morrow morning?"

Tarrant's reply was another nod.

"All right," said Bodine. "Who's betting?"

The promoter seemed to dominate the game as a matter of course. Power and confidence and success radiated from him. He was surprisingly young in appearance, his heavy build alone belying the youthful pink of his square, clean-shaven face. Tarrant watched his eyes and saw them following every move of the dealer's fingers.

Tarrant's run of luck hesitated, descended to a trickle and gave out. Bodine now became the winner. He played swiftly and heavily, a bullying game yet a careful one. When he dealt his large hands moved too swiftly for the eye to follow. The pace began to tell on the other players. One by one they dropped out until only Tarrant, Bodine and the mule skinner remained. Tarrant was playing cautiously. He now had some seven thousand dollars before him and Bodine's onslaughts upon the pile were in vain. The skinner, sensing the struggle that was on, cashed in and sat back. A group of spectators gathered in silence about the table, and silently Bodine and Tarrant bucked one another.

The break came on Tarrant's deal. Bodine, growing impatient, tried a bluff and was called. There were nearly four thonsand dollars in the pot when Tarrant raked it in.

"Bring us a new deck, Arkansaw," called Bodine. "We'll quit piffling."

"Got a cigar, anybody?" he demanded, rummaging his pockets with his swift hands while the new unbroken deck lay before him. "Thanks!"

His large hands swept up the cards and tossed them across to Arkansaw.

"Break the seal and shuffle them," he directed.

After Arkansaw had complied Bodine took the cards and passed them to Tarrant for the cut. He dealt the first card. Tarrant, raising one corner of his card, saw that he had the joker and shook his head.

"Pass," said he.

Bodine also passed, and dealt the second cards face up. Tarrant received a deuce, Bodine the ace of spades. Tarrant bet a hundred dollars. Bodine mouthed his cigar a moment, then pushed forward his entire stake.

"It goes for ten thousand dollars," said he; "it's time to break up."

By all the rules of the game Tarrant was constrained to meet the bet.

"There's only about nine thousand here," he said, pushing in his stack. "Show-down for that."

Bodine nodded and dealt, Tarrant a four and himself a trey. He dealt on until next to the last card. On that deal Tarrant received a nine-spot and Bodine one of the vital deuces. There was a pause. Men were breathing hard about the table, but the two players were apparently unconcerned.

"Throw her face up," said Tarrant.

His last card fell before him. It was a queen. Bodine's card was a deuce.

"What have you got hidden?" demanded Tarrant as he turned up his joker.

"Enough to beat you," said Bodine and turned up the third deuce in his hand.

Tarrant rose.

"You're a miracle man sure enough," he said significantly, but Bodine was apparently too busy pulling in the pot to notice Tarrant's words or the tone in which they were uttered.

"Ten o'clock to-morrow, Tarrant?" said he. "You won't forget, will you?"

"Not anything," replied Tarrant quietly.

"By cripes!" exploded Old Man Swanson when the door had closed after the promoter. "I want to see that deck."

"No!" said Tarrant, and swept the cards into his brown hands. "Not after he has gone. I paid for them," he concluded with a smile: and tore the cards into small bits, and scattered the pieces upon the floor.

CHAPTER X

MARJORIE sat alone in her suite in the Stringer Hotel. She was very tired for it was well into the morning part of the night after her arrival. Her father had heard of Bodine's return to town and had prolonged the evening on the Roof in the hope that the great man would appear. Bodine had come straight from the poker game; and there had been a dance and a supper, swiftly and lavishly organised by Bodine in her honor. And Marjorie, listening to the snatches of conversation between dances, found her world entirely upset.

Bodine was her father's idol and master. She sensed this at the first meeting, and she resented with filial loyalty the spectacle of her own father playing sycophant to any man. At the same time she recognised the force and attraction of the promoter's personality. There was no chance for her to fail to recognise that. She felt it when she danced with him; the touch of his fingers conveyed the magnetism of the man, to which she with her virginal youth was so responsive. She felt it when his eyes were upon her, and she wished her party dress had covered her shoulders which Bodine found so attractive. Each time she rose to dance with him a tiny sensation of dread, of distaste, moved within her, but at the touch of his hands, of his arms, this was forgotten. His capacity for domination repelled her until she was under the spell of his phsyical magnetism.. And then each time she responded to this attraction girlishly, yielded to it, gave herself up to the clasp of his arms.

Yet now she felt anything but thrilled. She felt sapped of her youthful buoyancy and wanly wondering what was responsible. Hitherto, when in doubt she had always turned to her father in complete confidence for a solution of her problems, but his present attitude toward her forbade that. She bridled as she recalled the slavishness with which he listened to Bodine's words. In Bodine's manner she sensed a tingle of contempt for the man who allowed himself to be so shamelessly obsessed by the lure of oil speculation. She marvelled that her father could not see it. He was blind, that was the trouble; blinded by the glitter of swiftly made wealth. She longed to throw her arms about his neck, to sit on his knee, to pet and cajole him, and to draw comfort and confidence from his presence. She needed him as a father now perhaps as she had never needed him before; and Dr. Dickinson at that moment was studying for the dozenth time the closing figures from the Oil Exchange and regretting impatiently that several hours intervened before the Exchange opened again.

As they parted Mr. Bodine casually had said to her father: "I met that fellow Tarrant from Tin Spout, this evening, Doctor."

"Yes?" suggested Dr. Dickinson eagerly.

"Quite a fellow, to judge by a brief meeting," said Bodine. "He's coming at ten in the morning to see me."

"Then," affirmed Dickinson, "you will have him in the Syndicate before noon and the field will be clear for us up at Tin Spout."

"I'm not so sure of that," returned the promoter carelessly. "He looks like he might have ideas of his own. Of course he can't be allowed to interfere. I will attend

to that. The field at Tin Spout will be clear for us when we want it."

Marjorie rose wearily to prepare for retiring. She paused for a moment before a mirror and regarded herself critically. No; the little gown she wore was not at all too low about the neck. She had worn it to several parties before and had not felt conspicuous. It was when Bodine looked at her that she felt it was too low. Yet her father said he was a great man and that Tarrant was impossible. Funny thing; she hadn't even thought of her shoulders when Tarrant looked at her. His eyes— She wondered abruptly how Mr. Bodine would attend to him, and she was wondering when she dropped into bed and fell asleep.

Tarrant approached the offices of the Pan-National Syndicate on the stroke of ten in the morning. As befitted the character of the business transacted therein, there was little suggestion of crude oil about these offices. They occupied the entire front of the second story of the fourteen-story Bob Wilk Building on the most important business corner of Ranger Falls. Bob Wilk had struck oil on his ranch a year after fortune had come to Jake Stringer, but when Jake proceeded to win fame by erecting the luxurious hostelry which bore his name, Wilk saw his twelve floors and raised him two more.

The Syndicate occupied the most expensive suite in the building. It was an impressive office. One had but to enter the outer door and gaze upon the expensive furniture and fittings to realise that here abode wealth and success. There was nothing present to mar the effect with a suggestion of the muck and tribulation incidental to oil production. True there was a fresco of large panoramic photographs of oil wells about the walls. These wells were

all gushers, the photographs being taken with the oil plume waving high above the crown block of the derrick. To supplement the photographs there was a series of impressive geological maps which showed in simple, undebatable fashion that beneath every lease of the Syndicate there lay a great pool of oil awaiting only the drill bit to spout fortune into the hands of those sufficiently intelligent and enterprising to purchase Pan-National Syndicate stock.

Tarrant stood in the entrance of the suite and studied the photographs and the maps and legends, and wondered. The finale of the poker game the night before did not sit comfortably in his memory. Wayne had let slip the information at Tin Spout that Bodine had been a professional gambler before entering the oil industry. He had been unable to detect any improper performance on the part of Bodine, but he was not satisfied. He considered the photographs of the oil wells that hung before him. The pictures were obviously intended to impress persons unfamiliar with oil production in that field. On Tarrant they made an impression of such a nature that when he was shown into the private office of the President of the Pan-National Syndicate he was fully on his guard.

Bodine sat at the head of a long table in the room. To his right and left sat two of the best lawyers in the state. The railway manager and the congressman who had been at Arkansaw's the night before also were present. It was truly a formidable array, as Bodine had planned it should be. Tarrant appraised each man individually, and as he sensed that each was ruled by one idea, and that idea emanating from Bodine's mind, he turned to him.

"Sit down, Tarrant," said the promoter. "Have a cigar?"

"If you don't mind," said Tarrant, "I'll roll my own."

Bodine nodded and glanced at a sheaf of papers before him.

"You had a talk with Mr. Wayne, I believe, Tarrant?" said he.

"Wayne talked to me," replied Tarrant.

"Yes. I told him to ask you to run down and see me."

"So he said."

Bodine paused for Tarrant to continue, but the pause was in vain.

"I suppose Wayne said something about the Pan-National Syndicate?" suggested the promoter.

"Something," agreed Tarrant.

"Did he explain our future activities in the Tin Spout field?"

"He raved considerable, yes."

"Did he make a favourable impression, may I ask?"

"Who? Wayne?" chuckled Tarrant. "He didn't have to; I know him too well. He's a good little scout even if he has got a bad case of oil fever."

None of them smiled. Apparently this was too serious for humour.

"We are capitalising for a hundred millions," said Bodine after a pause.

"So Wayne said."

"We've got the log of every well that's been drilled in the Tin Spout field," went on the promoter. "I've had my own drillers working as roughnecks on every gang up there. We know how many barrels are produced by each productive well, and how many are not producing. We know just how much expenses have increased—labor, material, and so on—and how production has not in-

creased. We know the Tin Spout field to the last dollar, Tarrant."

"And still you capitalise at a hundred million?" said Tarrant slowly.

Bodine nodded.

"Tarrant," said he, "we know the Tin Spout field, its past, present and future."

"Whoap! Hold up!" Tarrant held up his hand. "You may know the past of that field, Bodine, since you have had your spies in there, and you probably know its present; but when any man talks of knowing the future of a big oil field he's kidding himself that he's got hold of secrets that the Lord keeps mighty close to Himself."

"Not quite," said Bodine. "We know the future of that field, and I can prove it to you."

"How come?"

"The future of the Tin Spout oil field is going to be just what the Pan-National Syndicate decides it shall be," came the answer. "No more, no less."

Tarrant shook his head slowly.

"I have driven holes in a lot of oil fields, Mr. Bodine," said he, "but I never got confident enough to make a remark like that."

"We are confident enough," retorted Bodine. "I will explain later. Let's get down to cases, Tarrant. You have got to admit that your operations have scarcely been on a big scale."

"Not yet," agreed Tarrant.

"Your methods have been good enough," continued Bodine, "but they belong to a past era in the oil business. This is a new day, in this as well as other industries. You have played the oil game solely as a game. As you

follow it—I don't mean you alone, but all operators like you—it is entirely a gamble. You may hit something with your drill bit and you may not. Now that's not business, Tarrant; it isn't efficiency. Good business men don't make a gamble of business any more; they organise along certain efficient lines. The day of efficiency has arrived, in this business as in all others. The haphazard, inefficient man cannot exist in it any more than he can in any other line. Two things are inevitably necessary to-day—organisation and efficiency. They do the trick, Tarrant; they convert the oil business from a gamble to an industry."

"Don't tell me you've got a sure way of telling where to drill!" protested Tarrant. "I spent a couple of years studying geology and some more years in gaining experience and I haven't got a sure system yet."

"There you are; the very words: 'a sure system,'" said Bodine, smiting his desk. "A 'sure system.' That's what we have got, Tarrant. Confess, now, you get pretty sick of the game when the luck runs against you?"

"I'm human," admitted Tarrant.

"And you've often wished to high heaven you could devise a system that would guarantee certain returns?"

Tarrant nodded, and Bodine leaned forward, patting his desk earnestly with his big hand.

"Tarrant," said he, "that is just what the Pan-National Syndicate offers every leaseholder and operator in the Tin Spout field, and you, with your big acreage, are particularly situated to benefit from affiliation with us. We can guarantee not only certain returns, but returns greatly in excess of your greatest expectations. As an experienced oilman, knowing the Tin Spout field as you do, considering the wells drilled and your undeveloped acreage, you

can estimate approximately what your expectations may be. Very well. Make your estimate and double it. Turn it in. We will accept it and guarantee you—mind, guarantee you—returns double your best expectation. Does it sound like a proposition a good business man can refuse to listen to?"

Tarrant looked out of the window.

"You are not telling me the secret of your system, I suppose, Bodine?" said he.

"I am—as soon as I know you are in the proper mood to receive it."

"You don't reckon I am in that mood now?"

Bodine spread his hands with an open gesture.

"You are a business man, so am I," said he. "I don't flatter myself that I am able to sell a proposition to a man like you at the first meeting. I know you came in here prejudiced against the Syndicate. If I am any judge of men you are not the sort of man to drop a prejudice easily. I didn't expect to kill that prejudice with a few words. I don't expect to be able to convert you to our point of view at once. You will have to be shown. All we ask is the opportunity to show you. I want to know if you are willing to listen further to our proposition."

"If I wasn't willing to listen to such a proposition I ought to be in a home for feeble-minded," said Tarrant, "but I've got to see your log before I go any further than that."

"Just right," said Bodine appreciatively, "just right. You have got to be shown something real." He turned to his associates.

"Gentlemen, Tarrant is a hard man to sell the idea to," said he. "He is the true discoverer of the Tin Spout field,

and the largest producer and leaseholder up there. Naturally we want him with us; and I believe we are agreed that we are prepared to be extremely liberal with him?"

The others nodded. Bodine turned back to Tarrant.

"Through the medium of our organisation and our connections with other organisations and banks throughout the country," he resumed carefully, "we have accurate knowledge that never before has there been such an amount of money available for oil-development purposes. The money of the country, in large and small quantities, is ready and eager to get behind the oil industry. The boom we have had is only a drop in the bucket to what is coming. This knowledge is the basis of our organisation."

"Everybody knows the country is full of sucker money just now," drawled Tarrant. "That isn't news. What I want to hear about is your sure system."

"All right," said Bodine, "here it is: A selling organisation that can place $50,000,000 worth of oil stock in five months."

"Tin Spout stock?"

"Yes."

"With investors and scouts prowling round and seeing those little shallow wells brought in?"

"Not a single well to be brought in," flashed back Bodine. "Understand, Tarrant? Stop all production instantly. Seal the wells. Place guards all round. Then—an advertising campaign that will make Tin Spout nationally known as the one big promise in the oil game. Not an ordinary haphazard boom, Tarrant, but a carefully organised campaign that is certain of success. No campaign of the sort ever has been started by such an organisation as we have or with such a sure guaranty of

success. We offer you a sure thing for a gamble. Now we are ready to talk figures."

Tarrant took a long time before replying.

"You said I was the true discoverer of the Tin Spout field," he began. "Well, I'm not. The true discoverer of that field hasn't showed up yet. The Tin Spout field has not been discovered—yet."

"You are talking about that fairy story, the big pool?" said Bodine with a smile.

"That is just it, the fairy story, the big pool," admitted Tarrant. "It has busted me three times by actual count. I am still drilling for it. I have got a new wildcat started. I will continue drilling. That's what I am up there for."

He stood up.

"Gentlemen, I am not sitting in with you," he said; "I am staying out simply as a matter of cold, hard-headed business. I am not criticising. The country is full of fools waiting for somebody with oil stocks to take their money, and I have no soft notions about it, though I don't happen to be interested that way myself. But you talk of making the future of the Tin Spout oil field. Why, men, that future was made when the process of geological evolution determined the formation up there. Any geologist will tell you that. You've got a big organisation and a fine system, and you talk in millions, but I am telling you I think you are a lot of pikers. I am playing the Tin Spout formation to win against your sure system. You can organise; you can put your sure system of stock selling into effect. But when you talk of controlling what this old earth holds—then, gentlemen, you are defying God!"

CHAPTER XI

TARRANT had expressed the faith which was his inspiration.

The mental equipment of the true oil hunter is a compound of geological knowledge, hard experience and faith. Perhaps the latter is the important ingredient, for it is faith which drives the oil seeker on after geology and experience have told him to halt. Tarrant's faith had been lighted by the Tin Spout field. All his geological knowledge and all the practical oil wisdom he had gleaned from a varied experience in many fields told him that a great oil pool must exist here or science and experience be counted as naught. Other operators had drawn the same conclusions about the field, had drilled, gone broke, cursed and gone away. Fortunes had been lost and men had been ruined in purse and spirit in the search for the great pool.

Tarrant had continued to drill after others had lost their nerve and quit. The small wells he had brought in, which had attracted other operators and which had resulted in the creation of Tin Spout, represented to him only the working capital upon which he drew for the funds to prosecute his search for the great pool. Each hole he drilled might bring in the golden aim of his quest; but he was hard-bitten by experience and his refusal to enthuse over the possibilities saved him from heart-breaking disappointments.

He drilled enough test wells to cover the proven area

of the Tin Spout field; and then he began to wildcat, a term which has been perverted in usage and meaning. In the true wildcatter of the oil fields the old-time prospector of the West has his reincarnation. He is the restless visionary, the dreamer of the industry. He it is who "spuds in" a day's march beyond the practical crowd—"out where the wildcats howl," hence the term. Like the old-time prospector of buried decades, padding his lonely way over desert and mountain in the van of the mining men, so the wildcatter searches for his favourite structure in regions where the oilmen have not reached.

Dishonest promotion schemes involving test wells have thrown the term into disrepute, but it is the wildcatter, with his faith in himself and his instinct for exploration, who finds the new oil fields, which, usually, others develop and profit by.

Tarrant's No. 5 wildcat well was one of the hundreds of wildcat wells which are drilled each year on faith. The restlessness of the idealist had driven him out of the proved field. He had located a structure that appealed to him. It lay to the south of the Tin Spout field, in a region covered with scrub oak. A portion of the operators in that field had laughed at him when he had spudded in there. These were mainly the younger men. The old-timers had said nothing, knowing from experience both bitter and kind that only one thing is certain about oil drilling, and that is its uncertainty.

Tarrant returned to Tin Spout in a grim frame of mind. The picture of Bodine and his associates about the conference table, a group of hard-headed men desperately resolved upon high fortune, had made a deep impression upon him. He had appreciated fully the significance of

their entry into the Tin Spout field. It marked the end of the happy-go-lucky operation that had prevailed there. Tense days were coming. The Syndicate was playing for high stakes. The idle money of the people of the whole country was their prospective loot; Tin Spout was to be the bait. Their organisation was a machine. Once the machinery had been set in operation anything or anyone threatening to interfere with its functioning would be ruthlessly crushed.

He stopped his car on an elevation on his wildcat lease one evening upon leaving the well and looked back at the site. The new timbers of the derrick rose above the green tops of the scrubby trees, and the sound of the engine and the machinery came faintly to his ears. All about there was the great open country. In Tarrant's mind passed a review of the history of that section—the Indians, the white hunters, the free-range cattlemen and a few pioneering farmers. These had passed on. Their passage had scarcely scratched the landscape, and had left it unsettled. Oil had not been discovered there then. The crude oil was of greater power than all the forces previously at work in the section.

The well was only an insignificant interruption to its barrenness. But what the well stood for was potent beyond compare. The derrick and other derricks which speckled the landscape represented potential wealth. They were potent enough to stir the instinct of greed in the souls of desperate men. Because of the oil which lay somewhere beneath the barren topsoil of the region, men came prowling thither avidly. The new well in the untamed scrub oak symbolised the true quest for crude oil.

Its power reached out, luring men with its promise, enslaving them, deciding their destinies.

Men like Doctor Dickinson and Bodine. And not only men. The fate of women, too, was linked with the promise held in these derricks. Tarrant's mind held a picture of Marjorie Dickinson, and the circle of oil-maddened men of which she, through her father, had become a part. With the picture ran the memory of how she had turned away from him on the roof garden at Ranger Falls, and as he drove on to town his intense nature was seething vehemently and his countenance was clouded and grim.

A change had come to Tin Spout almost overnight. It was not merely that there were more people in town. Often in its past history, after a new well had been brought in there had followed incipient booms with a consequent influx of visitors—oilmen, prospective investors, lease hounds and the riffraff which follows them—remaining only long enough to discover that the field did not promise richly, and moving away.

There was a new spirit present now. As Tarrant drove up the muddy street and stopped at the garage for gasoline he was conscious of a heightening tension. Strangers were present in considerable numbers. A large tent was being set up near the box-car station; a pile of cots lay beside it; and on a post pounded hastily into the ground was a crude sign, "Beds." A passenger train of two coaches stood on a siding, the cars empty and steam up in the locomotive.

"That's a special from Ranger Falls," explained the garage man, "brought up a crowd of Pan-National Syndicate people and a lot of investors. Going to take them

back this evening. Man named Doc Dickinson is in charge; guess they're sure 'nough going to make this man's town hum. You joined in yet, Spence?"

"No," said Tarrant.

"Going to, though, ain't you?"

"No."

The garage man showed resentment.

"Everybody else is," said he. "Look at 'em flocking about Doc Dickinson up there."

The syndicate party having completed its inspection of the near-by field was on its way back to the train. Doctor Dickinson was in the lead and at his side, Tarrant saw with a leap of his heart, was Marjorie. He turned away. A sudden shout from up the street recalled his attention. A crowd of men had come rushing out from the pool parlor directly in the path of the visitors. A man came running to the garage.

"Tarrant," he shouted, "old Elmer is in a jam!"

When Tarrant reached the scene he saw his foreman calmly mounting the load of casing he had come after, while at the head of the four-horse team a burly oil worker stood and cursed furiously.

"You can't put it over on me," growled the roughneck. "Get off that load!"

Elmer seated himself calmly and gathered up the reins.

"You hear me?" snarled the man in the street. "You can't ring in phony dice on me. Get down!"

"Science will overtake luck," retorted Elmer nonchalantly. "Giddap."

"No, you don't!" The roughneck precipitated himself at the horses' heads. "You cheap sure-thing artist, you'll stay right here till I get my jack. Hand it over."

"Out of the way, boy, out of the way," said Elmer calmly.

"Hand it over!" growled the other. "If you don't I'll climb up there——"

A long, slender whiplash sang through the air and snapped like a pistol shot against the roughneck's body. The man instantly reached inside his shirt and drew forth a large hunting knife.

"You ——" he roared. "I'll come up there and cut your heart out!"

"No need to do that, feller; no need at all."

The demeanor of the old foreman indicated that he considered such a dire threat as the proper and inevitable sequence to the demonstration of his prowess with the bull whip. He wasted no time or energy upon any of those outbursts of profane language and threatening gestures usually considered necessary as the prelude to a conflict. Without uttering a word and with an expertness of motion which suggested a frequent participation in such affairs he wound the reins about his whipsocket and slid down to the earth, drawing as he did so a long clasp knife which produced a six-inch blade at the touch of a spring. Having done this he started toward his antagonist in a most businesslike manner. This sudden acceptance nonplussed the challenger so thoroughly that for a moment he stood speechless and motionless.

"No need climbing up, feller," drawled Elmer, as he came on. "I'll come to you."

He was a very wicked-looking old skinner now, and the roughneck retreated slowly.

"Stop where you are!" he cried, laying the knife flat

in his hand and drawing his arm back. "I'll throw it through you."

The party of visitors had retreated at the first glimpse of the knife in the roughneck's hand. At the sight of Elmer the retreat became a panic-stricken flight. The door of the pool parlor suddenly became jammed by a crowd of appalled citizens all trying to find shelter at once. On the outskirts of the jam Doctor Dickinson was to be seen, his full face the color of tallow, striving to claw a way through the pack of the more nimble-footed.

"Better throw it, feller," said Elmer, never halting a step. "I'll be all over you in a minute."

The roughneck swung his knife hand low at his right hip.

"Stop him, Tarrant!" cried someone. "You're near him."

"So is Elmer," said Tarrant.

"Now, hombre," said Elmer as he stopped within arm's length of his opponent, "be you going to throw that knife or ain't you?""

The other made one or two attempts to complete the movement he had begun, but the spirit and the flesh were not willing. He stood undecided.

"No, you don't!" cried Elmer. "No, sirree! You don't get me off my load for nothing! You're going to throw that knife or put it up and eat your mess of crow."

The roughneck wilted completely. His knife soon was closed and returned to his pocket. The tension was over.

"I knowed it, you know!" chortled Elmer remounting his load. "Hard ones don't bellyache about losing a bet. Giddap."

The danger over, Doctor Dickinson recovered his poise promptly.

"The ruffians!" he spluttered. "Who are they? Their names!"

"The tall one is Tarrant's foreman," replied a bystander.

"Tarrant? I thought so," snapped the doctor. "When we institute our operations we shall take steps to eliminate such ruffians from the field."

Marjorie walked by his side toward the train. She looked straight ahead and Tarrant saw that her cheeks were flushed.

CHAPTER XII

THE Pan-National Syndicate had chosen its time with scientific accuracy. It was the psychological hour for an oil boom. In a measure such a phenomenon was an inevitable outcome of the time and the national situation. Good times had prevailed for a sufficient period to make the citizenry of the land, man for man, the richest this world has ever held. A fierce native optimism, bred of this very plethoric condition and of a naïve disinclination to face life squarely, had resulted in a nation of a hundred millions ripe for the plucking. Bankers had a surplus of deposits in excess of their opportunities for loans; business men had more capital than the operation of their enterprises required; farmers bought land at insanely high figures; workingmen received pay envelopes marked with figures such as they never had held before; even the millions of working girls throughout the land had money.

In Detroit a man inevitably named for the mission he was to accomplish had for years been steadily inculcating the nations' millions with a new habit. Others might seek to provide the fortunate few with the means to motor luxury; this master builder was fated to make the great body of his fellow Americans take to gasoline, via the internal-combustion engines. By thousands the productions of his genius rolled out upon an eagerly welcoming populace, and the year's product of a gusher oil well was swallowed by them in a day.

Synchronously with the acquisition of this habit by the American people, grew the development of the oil-burning engine upon the seven seas. Gradually but inevitably the carrier bottoms of the world were turning from the cumbersome coal and warping in to piers where pipe heads dripped a thick, black trickle of fuel oil. The internal-combustion engine in the motor vehicle and the oil burners upon the ships had turned the trick. They had changed the world. A new era was ushered in. Brilliant geologists died in Burma jungles, desperate adventurers froze in the Arctics; and the great Tin Spout oil boom became possible—because of it all. For the engines must be fed.

Old mother earth must be further harrowed and pierced to yield the power necessary to help drive her stumbling children forward on their troubled path. The world had to have more oil. It was the new magic, the liquid gold. The word alone drove men mad. It drove them mad enough to believe that if they invested a hundred dollars they would receive in return ten or a hundred times as much. Few knew what an oil well is. All knew what an oil share is—or was. The popular hypnotism of the hour was complete.

Thus, in the oil fields, two great industries sprang up where but one had flourished before. The serious but thrilling business of drilling deep holes in the earth in search of crude petroleum developed an activity and intensity such as the industry had not witnessed since the long past days of oil discovery in Pennsylvania. Where formerly a scattering of derricks reared their heights over a drab landscape now solid forests of them cluttered the view. Where earth's treasure of oil had been drawn up

in a slow trickle now it was pumped in a steady flood. The production of oil boomed.

But greatly as this solid industry flourished, its growth was slow and undramatic compared to the pyrotechnical leap into full-blown life of the other industry which flashed at its side. The "oil boomers" held the stage. It was their activities that stunned, dazzled and left agape the public. Their stories filled the papers; their towns, rising overnight, appeared in word pictures in the magazines. The meteoric effulgence of the great boom promoters, men of vision and boldness incomparable, caught and held the public attention. The public knew of a great industry only through their lenses of magic. The public accepted the improbable promises of these men. The public, as usual, paid. The evidences of the boom to come began to appear in Tin Spout without delay.

One morning as Tarrant went to the post office for his mail he saw a switch engine shunting a string of freight cars onto a siding. Before the wheels of the cars had fairly stopped a crowd of workmen was swarming over the train and unloading the building material which comprised its freight. A gang of carpenters was hastily remodeling and enlarging a one-story building in the middle of the town's single street and fitting its front with the first plate-glass window in Tin Spout. Painters were working upon the heels of the carpenters, painting the building a clean white in contrast to the raw, dust-colored lumber of the other buildings. Hardwood flooring was being laid, and under a tarpaulin outside lay highly polished desks, tables, chairs and other items of expensive and showy office equipment. There was much work remaining to be done on the building, but a large new sign

already was hung across its front. Men were standing in the mud of the street reading with eager eyes the inscription:

PAN-NATIONAL SYNDICATE
GENERAL OFFICES

"Know what that means, Spence?" demanded Ross, a local real-estate man, as Tarrant came up.

"I can read," replied Tarrant.

"It means that the boom has hit Tin Spout!" was the exuberant retort. "The Miracle Man is going to get busy. I hear you haven't taken any stock in the Syndicate, Tarrant?"

"You have heard right," responded Tarrant.

"Most of us are shutting down for the present," suggested an oilman.

"I noticed that."

"Yes; it is part of the Syndicate's plan," returned Ross. "No wells completed until sufficient capital has been assured for our great drilling campaign to begin. Outside people won't invest in a field when dry holes and little wells like your Number 4 are the best that we can show."

"No," said Tarrant, "and I think they are right."

"Of course they are! That's the idea. Cut out the dusters and dribblers completely. That's why we are shutting down. You know people would rather invest in a big promise than back a small sure thing. That's human nature, isn't it?"

"I suspect it is," agreed Tarrant. "I know that's my failing."

"Then why don't you come in with us and shut down?" demanded Ross.

"Who? Me?" Tarrant prepared to go on. "Why, you see, boys, I am in the oil business. My game is drilling wells. So long."

He realised that a new attitude toward himself was beginning to assert itself in the attitude of his old friends and neighbors. He did not blame them. He had seen the promise of sudden oil wealth turn men mad with greed too often to be surprised at it. Bodine had "sold" his syndicate idea to these people just as later on his organisation would sell the stock to a multitude of investors. The boom held a promise of wealth to the people of the Tin Spout field; and they would not have been human had they not resented one of their number appearing as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise.

Tarrant realised fully in what character he now appeared to his neighbors. He realised fully, also, that for him the die was cast. The people did not know. No one would tell them. He knew, and so did Bodine. They understood one another grimly, Bodine and Tarrant, but the townspeople saw only a stubborn operator holding out against a great, beneficent organisation. In his wildcat operations Tarrant had sought to place the stock in the hands of those whose circumstances justified their participation in a sheer gamble. The confidence which had been bred by his success in the field had, however, interfered with such a program. Stock in Tarrant General, which was issued against all his properties, was mainly in the hands of prosperous investors, while men and women who had not money sufficient for a decent livelihood had invested in his most desperate gambles.

"The wilder the wildcat the more eager fools are to

buck its claws," he had decided. As a consequence hundreds of shares which he had issued against the No. 5 test well were in the hands of people eager to do anything which might give their useless certificates some value.

Tarrant's first knowledge that Bodine's agents had been working among his stockholders was when a committee of them called upon him at his office. Ross, the real-estate man, was spokesman and his tale was briefly told. The Pan-National Syndicate offered a way for the stockholders to realise upon their investments. If the Tarrant interests were merged with the Syndicate's the dead stock would be converted, share for share and dollar for dollar, into the shares of the Pan-National. Having spoken thus Ross stepped back, and instantly a babble of arguments and pleas broke upon Tarrant from the other members of the committee. The young man waited until they were done.

"You gambled, didn't you?" he said. "You were warned to stay off this stock, but you were bound to burn your fingers. Now you are squealing. To get back your little stakes you want me to put all I have got—all I expect to get—in the hands of men who are my enemies. Do you think I am playing for chicken feed? Listen!" He rose at the call of a sudden thought. "You say you had confidence in me or you would not have invested. Have you confidence in me now?"

"Yes," shouted several.

"All right, we'll see. I will make you this proposition: Turn in your wildcat stuff to me. I will return, dollar for dollar, shares in Tarrant General. That includes every well I drill. I won't make any promises, as the

Pan-National has done. I won't say any more. Now let's see."

"I thought so," he resumed after a pause. "No sale. All right. That's all."

"Tarrant," said Ross, "how many more wells do you figure you'll drill in this field—alone?"

"Enough to break me hopelessly or bring in the big pool," was the prompt reply.

"We don't!" screeched the spokesman, "And that's why we want to do business with the Pan-National. We don't think you'll drill any more wells in this field."

"They'll squeeze you out!"

"My offer stays open," responded Tarrant grimly. "And the door is open, too."

CHAPTER XIII

SPENCE, you'd better come out and take a look at your wildcat," said Buck in Tarrant's office in Tin Spout a few days later. "It's getting popular. Me and Elmer want some orders about what to do."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tarrant. "You're not near the sand yet."

"I know it," agreed Buck. "The log reads about the same as No. 4, and if the formation holds up we won't be due in the sand for some time to come. Nevertheless, that well is beginning to attract attention. Folks come out and get nosey. Ask me to show 'em the log, and how deep are we going."

Tarrant looked up.

"Who?" he asked.

"Oh, Wayne, and most everybody," was the reply. "Come on out, Spence; I've got the tin can running outside."

Tarrant locked his desk and stepped out and into the battered mud-covered car which had brought Buck in from the field.

"What are you calling this well, Spence?" queried Buck as the car bounced and lurched along the deep ruts in the prairie which served as a road.

"Number Five," replied Tarrant.

"Call it Farthest South, why don't you?" retorted Buck, rising to avoid the jar of a bump. "And fix a couple saddles on this tin can so your high-priced employés can ride in comfort. Wayne was out to the lease last evening.

Say, that boy is going to the bad, you know it? If he's had a square night's sleep or drawn a completely sober breath since joining the Syndicate, I don't know the signs when I see them; and he's a nice little guy, too."

"They don't make them any better," agreed Tarrant heartily, "but that won't save a man if the oil fever has got him. Wayne sees a fortune ahead of him and the sight is too much for him. It is an old story in this game. I am sorry about him and wish I could help him."

"You can't," said Buck. "Say, what's that, a Pullman car on rubber tires?"

The object which had so startled Buck came in sight as they approached the well. It was one of the most expensive and most ornate of the many large and expensive cars which oilmen were bringing into the Southwest at this time. An oilman usually begins his career with a flivver as his motor vehicle. At the first smiling of fortune he rises to the dignity of six cylinders. If fortune continues to smile the number of cylinders beneath his car's hood is limited only by the capacity of the builders.

Bodine had procured the largest and most expensive car to be had and had provided it with a special body as large and expensive and glittering as the body builders could execute. The car, on its heavy, specially built tires, rolled like a red and nickel juggernaut over the troublesome ruts and came to a ponderous stop near the site of the well.

Tarrant was not so much interested in the car or the fact that it was paying his property a visit as he was in the passengers who reclined upon its rich upholstery. Wayne and his wife occupied the two chairs behind the glass compartment which housed the chauffeur. Upon

the rear seat, which was like a club settee, sat Bodine with Marjorie beside him.

"Tarrant, let's talk business," said Bodine, coming to the point with no waste of words. "You have got a new territory here that we can develop into millions. It supplements the old Tin Spout field perfectly for our purposes. For your purpose it isn't worth hauling a rig onto."

Tarrant looked steadily at the promoter.

"Bodine," said he, "the rig has been hauled on."

"I know, I know," responded Bodine. "You are a plunger, Tarrant; you're the kind who find the new fields. I know all that. But you've got hold of a wild gamble here. The formation of this field is known as well as if it was on the surface. You'll hit the sand here, Tarrant, that's certain; but will you find anything in it? With your limited resources can you drill enough holes to do justice to this new territory? I doubt it. It will take a million dollars to drill this field as it should be drilled. How are you going to get the million? The answer is, you can't get it. We can."

Tarrant made no reply. He had caught a glimpse of Marjorie's eyes. She was looking at him from beneath the brim of her wide hat, she was studying him, and there was a look of wonderment in her eyes which he could not fathom.

"Spence," interposed Wayne hoarsely, "you don't know how small the game you are playing is compared to Mr. Bodine's plans."

Tarrant regarded him seriously. There was a puffiness about Wayne's eyes that had not been there before he met Bodine, and his hands twitched nervously.

"All right," said Tarrant. "Then what?"

"Don't finish this well," put in Bodine. "Stop the drill now—before it hits the sand."

"Do you want to buy me out, Bodine?" asked Tarrant.

"Yes," came the instant reply; "what is your figure?"

Tarrant's eyes were on the girl. His look came back to Bodine and he saw that the promoter had caught the straying glance and was watching him and watching Marjorie like a cat.

"I won't sell—to you—Bodine," said Tarrant.

"But look here, Spence," exclaimed Wayne, "you'll hold back the development of the whole field here. We've got a boom coming to Tin Spout. We're going to turn a whistling post into another Ranger Falls. Think of what that means? You don't want to be the dog in the manger, do you? You don't want to delay the game, do you, Spence? Why, the whole gang is wild about it—everybody in town. It means millions. Come on! Get in the game!"

"I won't sell to you, Bodine," repeated Tarrant quietly.

Bodine did not reply. His suaveness was gone momentarily. He shot a catlike glance at the girl at his side, and again looked at Tarrant. Tarrant smiled. Bodine looked at him in silence for a few seconds; then he, too, smiled. Turning to the girl he said: "Marjorie, do you mind driving back to Ranger Falls with me?"

"Why, no," she said in surprise.

"I must be there this evening," said Bodine loudly. "George, turn round and go back to Tin Spout. We'll drop Mrs. Wayne and Wayne there, Marjorie, and you and I will drive to Ranger Falls."

"Some boat!" muttered Buck admiringly as he watched

the great car turn ponderously and roll out of sight. "But that company is too fast for Wayne. He'll land on the rocks pronto."

"Boss, you sure put on your war paint for their benefit," said Elmer. "I don't reckon they'll be crowding you with offers to buy from now on. That big fellow, Bodine, is one stiff citizen if I'm any judge. Reminds me something of a tiger that's had a close shave, massage and shampoo."

"You needn't let any of that crowd come near the well again," said Tarrant harshly.

"That's what we wanted to hear!" cried Buck. "Invite them to stay away, eh?"

"Yes," was the reply. "No rough stuff. If it comes let them start it. I think they will."

CHAPTER XIV

HOW about the crew on Number 5?" asked Tarrant of Elmer soon after Bodine's visit to the well. "Is there anyone there that we can't trust?"

" 'Trust'?" repeated Elmer. "How come?"

"The Pan-National Syndicate is not made up of a bunch of Sunday-school children," said Tarrant, "and I don't exactly look for them to come round and pat me on the back for refusing to throw in with them. They are succeeding in their campaign to shut down drilling and production in this field. The Swede brothers—the two Larsen boys—held out for a better deal from them and kept on drilling, and last night someone on the night tower dropped a charge of dynamite down the hole and ruined the well. Blew the whole string of tools and the casing into such a mess that they can't recover them. So now the Swedes are good boys and members of the Syndicate in good standing.

"That leaves me the only one drilling the field, and I understand they swear every time the bull wheel at No. 5 makes a revolution. They stopped the Larsen boys and their next play will be to stop me. They either had one of their own men working on the Swedes' night tower or bribed one of the men to do the job for them. If there is anyone working on No. 5, Elmer, that can't be trusted to the limit let me know about him so I can let him go."

Elmer carefully went over the names of the men employed on the test well, checking the record of each so

far as he knew it and voiced the opinion that all were reliable and faithful men except one.

"There's Ramos, that Mexican kid, that Buck put on as platform man last week," said he. "He's a good oil-man, but the other boys won't play cards with him. I dunno about him."

"Tell Buck to let him go," ordered Tarrant. "Tell him to make sure that each tower has got at least one of our old-timers on it. After dark nobody is to come as near as the boiler unless you know him as a friend."

"Speaking of Mexicans," said Elmer, "that reminds me that hard-looking hombre with the scar was pesticating round out there yesterday. I dunno, but I sure 'nough got a feeling I seen that hombre before. Goes by the name of Grogan. I don't like him. Know what his game is?"

"No, but he is a Syndicate man," replied Tarrant. "Invite him to keep strictly away if he comes out again."

"Well, sir," chuckled Elmer, "that's funny! That's just what I did. 'Mister,' I says, talking Spanish for some reason, 'there are nicer places for you to stroll.' 'I don't understand anything but English,' says he. 'The hell you don't!' says I in English. 'All right, hombre; vamoose—pronto! Sabe?' So he went away, taking it mighty easy; but Buck laughed at him from the crown block and this Grogan looked up at him just once—I tell you, Tarrant, he's one *malo* hombre, that bird. If I could only remember where I seen him before I would feel easier."

"Yes, it's a shame for hard ones to come round and scare a timid fellow like you," said Tarrant.

"Sure is," agreed Elmer solemnly. "I'm going to look at my map when I get back to camp. I got her marked

with a red dot every place I been. Looks something like a man with ery-siplus. I'll study her and see if some spot won't bring back to me where I seen this scar-faced who calls himself Grogan."

Tarrant's precautions were only such as he had frequently taken before. He had been through several oil-field fights in his strenuous career. He had seen his derrick and storage tanks go up in flame; once he had a well dynamited just as he was to bring it in. All that was in the game and he played the game to the limit. Having thrown down the gage to Bodine he asked for, and expected, no odds. He paid his attorney a heavy retainer for first call on his services. At his orders, his titles, leases and stock issues were searched for a possible loophole for an attack through the courts.

"Not that they are apt to start anything legal just now, Al," said he to the lawyer. "They don't own the courts—yet; but it is a stiff game and I am playing safe."

"You are suspicious," said the attorney. "Have you any reason for it?"

"Al, there are worse places than a poker game for sizing up a man," was Tarrant's enigmatic reply.

Having taken his precautions he waited vigilantly for Bodine's next move. But apparently Bodine was through with him for the time being. The new well was left strictly alone. His pumping wells at Tin Spout chugged away with no interference, and his storage tanks, where the crude oil was held while a new pipe line was being laid, were unmolested.

Tarrant did not relax his vigilant mood. Range bred as he was he adopted the tactics of the range when danger threatens. Nine Spot, the pinto pony, was a good night

horse, and night after night he carried his master about the field while Tarrant searched with the senses of a born hunter for signs of menace to his property. He returned late one night from one of these prowls to find Wayne seated in a huddle on his doorstep. Tarrant came up softly and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Wayne, old boy, what's wrong?" he said.

The young man started up from his doze in alarm.

"Oh! Oh! It's you, Spence," he stammered in relief. "I've been waiting. Fell asleep, I guess. You haven't got a drink on you, have you?"

"For heaven's sake, old boy, cut it out!" implored Tarrant. "You are traveling too fast. It is making a bum out of you."

"A bum? Me?" chuckled Wayne scornfully. "Man, I'm going to be a millionaire. You—you'll go broke drilling dry holes.

"What time is it?" he broke off, starting up. "I said I would see you. I got to get back. Spence, you—we're friends. I've got to tell you a few things you ought to know. The boys have got together on the proposition and they are not going to take any chances of having this boom killed off. It means too much; it is too big a chance. Everybody is together on it, the operators, the business men in town, and everybody. You are the only one who is holding out. I thought I—I would come and tell you, Spence."

"Go on," commanded Tarrant. "You haven't come here just to tell me that old news. What is the rest of it?"

"Well——" stammered Wayne—"I——Spence, you know you and I are friends?"

"Out with it!"

"It—it's this, Spence; the people here aren't going to let one hold out spoil the whole game."

"Go on!"

Wayne nerved himself and blurted:

"They won't let you keep drilling, Spence, and, by heaven they're right! Get in—or get smashed!"

Tarrant waited a long while before responding.

"Wayne," he said softly, "you're going to hell fast."

"What?"

"A little while ago—a few weeks," continued Tarrant, "and I would liked to have seen the man who could use you for his dirty work. But they have got you, boy; you have been running round with them out to the Country Club and drinking more than you are built to hold, and here you are, carrying Bodine's messages just as if you weren't your own man a few weeks ago."

"It isn't Bodine, I tell you," cried Wayne fretfully. "He wouldn't send you another word."

"Running his errands!"

"No! No! It was Marjorie—Miss Dickinson."

Tarrant sat down and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"What's the use of bringing a girl's name into the oil business, Wayne?" he protested gently.

"She sent me," said Wayne. "She and her father are here, and she got Mrs. Wayne to make me come."

"To tell me what you have said?"

Wayne hesitated, fidgeting nervously.

"If you must know, her father told her how—how the Syndicate is out to steam-roller you for holding out against them," he burst forth. "She didn't seem to think it was fair. She's queer that way. And so I had to come here and try to talk some sense into you."

"Why didn't she come herself?" demanded Tarrant.

"What?"

"If she was interested enough to send you——"

"Man, she couldn't do that," protested Wayne. "Why, she is one of the Syndicate crowd. Her father—and then Bodine—how could she?"

"What about Bodine and her?" asked Tarrant evenly.

"Bodine gets what he wants," was the evasive reply.

"I reckon Doctor Dickinson is mighty strong for Bodine?" suggested Tarrant after a pause.

"He thinks Bodine is a world beater."

"And she is the doctor's daughter, and she's just a kid," said Tarrant softly. "Wayne, why did she bother to send you?"

"I've told you, Spence. It was——"

"Pity!" cried Tarrant as the other hesitated.

"Well, something like that."

"Hell's bells!" Tarrant was on his feet laughing at the sky. "Pity!" he repeated in the egoism of youth. "All right, Wayne, you can go. There's no answer."

"Answer? Why, Spence——"

"Don't mind me. So long, old boy," said Tarrant, shaking hands. "You sure have done me a big favour."

CHAPTER XV

BUCK told me to tell you he was getting close to where the sand ought to be," said the cook at Well No. 5 when he came to town after supplies the next day. "The night tower sure shoved her down some last night."

"Has he hit the cap rock?" demanded Tarrant.

"I think he has," replied the cook to whom the important portion of the oil industry was the provision of meals for the crew. "Anyhow he said to tell you he was getting down near the finish."

"I'll be out this afternoon," said Tarrant. "Tell Buck if he gets a showing of sand before I get there to shut down and wait for me."

He was grimly pleased. The drilling of the wildcat well had progressed much more rapidly than he had any reason to hope; and, what was more important, much more rapidly than anyone outside his crew, which from the cook to Elmer was loyally silent, had any reason to suspect. The drill had gone to twelve hundred feet, the level at which lay the porous sand which contained the oil in the Tin Spout field in two weeks less than the average of time consumed in drilling in that section. Fortune had favoured him in this, at least. The Syndicate, presuming that the hole was far from the depth at which there was a possibility of an oil well being brought in, had made no effort to interfere with the drilling.

Had Tarrant been less hard-bitten by experience he might have been jubilant over the situation. That the Syndicate had no intention of further developing the Tin

Spout field he was confident. Bodine was not an oilman. The Tin Spout field was to him merely a basis for an advertising campaign. The sudden cessation of all new production in the field was an inspiration. With no small wells being brought in there need be no limit to the golden promises which the Syndicate might make. The craze for oil investments was rising to the pitch of a mad gamble. Investors, whose notion of an oil well was obtained solely from the skilful propaganda of the promoters, had eyes only for the spectacular. To the bulk of them all oil wells were "gushers," and a "gusher" meant millions.

If No. 5 came in a producing well it would deal the plans of Bodine and his Syndicate a severe blow. Oil in paying quantities on the wildcat lease would mean a fortune for Tarrant and a rush to that section. His lease comprised a thousand acres. If he got a well he would throw the tract open only to real oil companies whose business was drilling for oil and not selling stock. There would be plenty of them. Oil was at a peak price and steadily going up. There would be a rush of drilling rigs to the new field. A pipe line would come in.

He would get a spur of railway track there and a new oil town would spring up as a crop springs from the seed. Tin Spout would fade as an advertising proposition in the fierce light which would beat upon the new field. Tin Spout stock would be dead bait for investors and the Syndicate would be forced to develop its holdings in the Tin Spout field or, by collapsing, expose its scheme.

The potentiality of Well No. 5 was fully apparent to him, but he experienced no thrill or elation as he contemplated the situation. It all was contingent upon No. 5

striking a pay sand. Tarrant had drilled too many wildcat wells to permit himself to become enthusiastic.

He mounted Nine Spot in the afternoon and jogged easily out of town toward the lease. It was a breathless spring afternoon. Upon the open prairie country lay a mantle of silence. In the scrub oak surrounding the well site the silence was so complete as to be oppressive. Tarrant pulled the pinto up and sat motionless, listening. No sound came to his ears. The well was shut down.

"Jog along, pony," said he, shaking the reins, "the boys are waiting for us."

In the open clearing about the well the crew loafed at its ease. A pair of youthful derrickmen were wrestling earnestly, while their older fellows looked on, contemptuous of such a display of energy. Buck and Elmer sat on the platform, and by their attitude Tarrant saw that they were troubled.

"Well?" he said, as he stepped up to the casing.

"Yep," said Elmer sorrowfully.

"We hit her right where you figured she'd be," explained Buck. "The hell of it is we went right through her before we knew it."

"What?"

"There ain't over four feet of sand down there," blurted Elmer, "and it's as dry as a church."

Tarrant turned to the slush pool where the final bailings from the hole had been poured and after a careful examination of the muck he grew thoughtful. Elmer and Buck, regarding the calm with which their employer read the inexorable verdict of the bailing, looked at one another with admiration in their eyes.

Tarrant returned to the platform with no change in his expression.

"It is the Tin Spout sand, only here it is dry," he said. "What was the depth when you hit it?"

"Twelve hundred and thirty."

"That is twenty feet deeper than the sand lies at Tin Spout."

"Twenty feet exactly," agreed Buck, "and the sand peters out here."

"You say you have gone through the sand," asked Tarrant.

"Smack through it, and we didn't even bring in a trace," was the reply. "Didn't even get salt water."

"What are you in now?"

"Red clay again," said Buck. "Starting right over in the same stuff we got on top."

Tarrant pondered a moment.

"How does the log read, Buck?" he asked.

"Here it is. Just add twenty feet to any of your other well logs and you've got a duplicate of it."

Tarrant cast his eye rapidly over the driller's record of the formation which the drill had passed through on its way to the pay sand. There was no need to examine it more closely. At a glance he saw that, as Buck said, the log indicated practically the same structures as his drills had found to the north, at Tin Spout.

"Red clay, water, sand, red clay, sand, shale, red clay, sand rock, sand-hard, shale, gumbo, black shale, oil sand."

Tarrant knew the log by heart.

"Are you going to try a shot?" asked Buck.

His employer shook his head.

"No," agreed Buck, "it doesn't look worth it, that's a fact."

"We won't shoot it," said Tarrant.

He was looking at the casing head and his eyes were hard.

A few weeks ago he would have casually accepted the verdict as final, and tried his luck elsewhere. But mighty things had happened to him in those weeks and he was no longer the happy-go-lucky oil gambler. The immensity of the industry had always been apparent to him, as had the significance of each successful well releasing a virgin force into the world. True, there was more money to be made in the business than ever before, but that concerned him only because it might mean more power. And power was what he was after. He must stand on a plane with Bodine. This was what stirred him. He looked at the muck-spattered casing, but what he saw was Marjorie's eyes, clear and frank, yet luring with the mysterious lure of woman; and what he heard were Wayne's faltering words the night before admitting that her interest in Tarrant was one of—pity! The thought nerved him to a capacity for ventures beyond his wildest wildcatting. He seemed gifted with a new and greater vision.

"Shall we pull the casing, Spence?" asked Buck in a tone that made the question only a formality.

Tarrant did not appear to hear. He was like a man under the spell of inspiration.

"Shall we pull——"

"No!" exploded Tarrant. "We are going to keep on drilling. We are going deeper. We are going after the big pool right here. That pool wasn't meant for pikers to find. We've all been pikers here, working up shallow pro-

duction and quitting when we are down twelve hundred feet. That game is played out. It's bust or win big with me now. Put a guard on day and night here, Buck, and keep everyone off. Don't let a soul know what we're doing and don't let any one see the log or learn how deep we are going. Start your steam again. Get your string of tools down the hole. And start drilling and keep on drilling until I tell you to stop!"

His mood as he rode back to Tin Spout was one of relief. There was a sense of lightened responsibility. He had taken the plunge, staking all he had on a desperate gamble. Having so done, he felt easier. The result was in the hands of Fate.

As he emerged from the oak scrub onto the open prairie country he came full tilt into the opulence of a Southwestern spring sunset, and he straightened up in the saddle and filled his lungs to the bottom with the cooling air. Nine Spot, jog-trotting lazily, protested against soiling his dainty fetlocks in the mud of the road, and Tarrant, with a chuckle, swung him off from the rutted wheel tracks and rode across country. The pinto rewarded the manœuver by falling into the long, easy lope of the range horse. As they approached the town they came back to the road and Nine Spot, appreciating what was expected of a range horse entering town, broke into a sharp gallop.

The shadows of evening were stretching out over the scene. Along the western horizon a long streak of angry red was making a losing struggle against the encroaching darkness of night. In Tin Spout lights were beginning to gleam in the windows. The glaring headlight of a motor car streaked past him and Tarrant pulled the galloping pinto to one side to let it by. It came with a roar and a

rush. It was Bodine's car. Bodine sat beside the chauffeur and in the rear seat were Doctor Dickinson and Marjorie.

Tarrant watched the car sweep up toward Tin Spout. At the outskirts of the town its speed diminished sharply. In the rays of the headlight he saw the cause. A four-horse team hauling a truck loaded to the limit with casing was occuping the middle of the treacherous road. Tarrant laughed sharply. He recognised the teamster and the horses; that load of casing belonged to him and was on its way out to Well No. 5. He saw the big car swing out to go round the obstacle. A light automobile could have done it, but Bodine's car was ponderous even out of proportion to its extra size tires, and as it swung from the road it ploughed its length in the soft gumbo topsoil and came to a stop hub deep in a hole from which not even its powerful motor could lift it.

Tarrant brought the pinto to his haunches with a jerk and sat still and looked on. He saw Bodine and the chauffeur spring out to examine the wheels.

"I am afraid we are fast," came Bodine's heavy voice. "The earth is like glue here."

Doctor Dickinson ponderously joined the two men. Marjorie prepared to follow, but Bodine cried out solicitously:

"No, no, Marjorie! Stay where you are. The mud is impossible."

She stood on the broad running board undecided what to do. The pony had noiselessly carried Tarrant close enough to see her face. At the sight of her clean beauty a throb ran through him, but he recalled Wayne's explanation of her interest in him and steeled himself.

"Tony, run up to town and send a car back for Miss Dickinson," Bodine directed his chauffeur.

"Oh, that is too much trouble," she protested laughingly, "I can walk, easily."

"Not if I am allowed to have the say!" laughed Bodine with a gleam of his white teeth.

The devil of recklessness of the one-time cowboy flared up in Tarrant as naturally as tinder to the touch of a match. Nine Spot came dancing up to the car with short, tight-reined steps. Tarrant's face was as blank as an Indian's, and his blue eyes were boyishly innocent of guile. He held Nine Spot in hand with his left hand while his long right arm hung idle at his side.

"Can I give you any assistance, Miss Dickinson?" he asked.

"No, thank you," she stammered; and then she saw his face and gasped.

"Bodine!" called Tarrant laughingly. And he swung low from the saddle and swept the girl off the running board and up to his breast, and let Nine Spot go toward town, all with such suddenness and speed that the deed was done ere anyone could speak a word.

Marjorie's wild, instinctive clutch as she felt herself swept off her feet, flung her arms about Tarrant's neck, and he laughed and kissed her full upon the lips. The next instant it required all the strength of his steel-like arms to prevent her from injury, for at the touch of his lips she released her hold and struck him, fought him, tossed herself about, reckless of all but a desire to escape from the outrage.

"Don't kick!" laughed Tarrant. "The horse is a bucker."

"Let me go!" she gasped. "You beast! Let me go!"

"I won't till you stop your kicking," said Tarrant. "It wouldn't be safe."

"Put me down!"

"There, you've got him dancing again."

"I don't care, I don't care. Let me go!" she panted.

"You take it easy," was the rider's response. "I am not going to put you down until you quiet down. Quiet down, do you hear?"

"You dare command me—after—that?" she gasped.

"I do," he said steadily. "Have some sense. I didn't aim to do you any harm."

"Oh, you beast!"

"All right. All right. Let it go at that. But you have got to take it easy if you want the 'beast' to let you go. It won't pay you any to struggle. The horse won't steady down while you do. Besides, it won't do you any good because you can't get away until I am ready to let you go. I have got something to say to you."

The first tempest of rage subsided and she grew still. Her eyes flashed fire, and her cheeks were white with anger, but the arm about her waist was like iron, and the face and eyes above her held an expression that silenced her with wonderment.

"I aimed to do it—pick you off the running board," he told her calmly. "But I did not aim to kiss you till I had you up here. Then I knew I had to do it, and I knew why—because I had seen you riding with Bodine and because I love you, and I'm going to make you love me!"

"I hate you—I loathe you!' she cried.

"That's all right," he said swiftly. "I can understand that. It will take you some time to get over it, maybe.

That's all right, too. Now I am going to land you high and dry on the steps of the hotel, so I've got to talk fast. I love you."

"You brute! You don't know what the word means," she moaned.

"But I'm learning," he protested. "I never took stock in it before; but now I know. My life means you from now on; and you're going to learn to love me, too!"

He held her to him tensely, his face bowed close to her's and his eyes fixed with anguish and pleading, and then he dropped her lightly upon the steps. Once again upon her own feet her anger and courage returned.

"If you ever dare speak to me again may God punish you as you deserve!" she hurled at him.

He bowed acquiescently.

"Fair enough," said he. " 'As I deserve.' "

CHAPTER XVI

MARJORIE continued to stand on the steps of the hotel, staring at Tarrant's back as, sitting like a rock in the saddle, he rode on up the street. He looked back once, turning his head slowly without checking the loping horse, looking at her steadily for an instant and turning away, his face set in stern affirmation of his act and words. She watched him until sight of him was lost in the gathering darkness. His apparent nonchalance added fuel to the anger which seethed within her. Was it possible that his action was a mere incident to him, that it had left him entirely unaffected? For it had affected her mightily. She had been lost for the moment, and she had fought not because of fear or because she was hurt, but because of the amazing emotion within her which inclined her to yield to the moment's thrill. She was blazing with fury, and most of it was evoked by her own inner self. Had Tarrant been within reach of her voice she would have vented her wrath upon him. But Tarrant was gone. With his disappearance the fire seemed to go out in her and her spirit collapsed weakly. She seemed to wilt physically; her legs trembled, and she looked about helplessly.

Bodine was coming toward her. He had completely outdistanced her father and was rushing through the clinging mud with a burst of strength and agility which would not be stayed. His size and dominance seemed overpowering to her; it seemed as if fate, too mighty and swift

for her to resist or elude, was bearing down upon her, and she leaned faintly against the wall of the hotel, and Bodine came up and took her in his arms. She made no effort to resist, nor did she respond. Resistance or response were beyond her at the moment. She lay supine in his arms, feeling his hands upon her body, realising all that was taking place yet strangely numbed and indifferent to it. The world was upset for her. She did not move, while he carried her into the hotel and while his grasp upon her body grew more eager. She heard his voice, hoarse and tense, commanding sharply, a scurry of feet and the opening of a door. He bore her into the room and the door slammed, and at the sound Bodine's embrace became convulsive. He stood looking down upon her for a moment, and beneath his gaze she wearily closed her eyes.

"Put me down," she murmured.

Without replying he crushed her to his breast, then laid her gently upon the bed.

Marjorie sprang to her feet as if awakened from slumber by a sudden alarm. She was abnormally alert, quickened by some sudden sense of danger.

"Don't be alarmed; you are quite safe."

Bodine's eyes were upon her, assuring, caressing, yet devouring her. He was speaking words of assurance, but the elemental significance of the moment clamoured loudly to her, and words were ineffectual. He was between her and the door. Instinctively she grasped this as the crux of the situation. She crouched as if ready to spring away, every fibre of her being was tensed to the breaking point. Gradually his words won, driving away

the elemental alarm which had roused her and forcing her to listen to what he was saying.

"You mustn't judge Tin Spout by one bad actor. He isn't at all typical. Most of the men here are rough, but they respect women. Try to forget about it. I will make sure it can't happen again."

Then her father's excited voice as he came puffing into the room: "I will take care of her; thank you, Bodine, thank you."

Alone with her father, Marjorie grew calm, and her confidence in herself returned. She waited patiently while his paternal indignation vented itself and until his vituperation of Tarrant ceased for want of breath.

"I want to go home, Daddy," said she, and instantly she felt sorry she had spoken, felt sorry for her father at the look of alarm which came into his countenance at her words. Expressions of indignation, of craftiness and of ruthless determination followed one another across his disturbed eyes.

"Want to go home?" he said in a voice that sickened her. "Want to run away and leave me just when—just when I need your company the most!"

"Daddy!" she murmured.

"After all I have done for you!" he went on. "Marjie, haven't I done all for you a father could?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Is it asking too much for you to stay with me here—when I am trying to do my best for you?" he demanded. "I am not doing this for myself, Marjie; I'm thinking of you and your future. I wouldn't be doing my duty as a father if I didn't take advantage of the opportunities offered here. Mr. Bodine has taken me into his complete

confidence. You've noticed how much we've been together recently; since you came, in fact? You don't realise what that means to me, Marjie. There is no limit—positively no limit. Bodine is the coming man in the oil business. I'll go up with him. Marjie, you can't think of leaving me now. I can't——"

"No, no!" she threw herself upon his breast, sickened at the spectacle of his abjectness and eager to do anything within her power to stop it.

Her affectionate surrender assured him. He was her father; she would listen to him, obey him. He patted her head with a trace of condescension in his manner.

"My little girl is upset," said he. "I will leave you a mild bromide, Marjie, and prescribe a rest in bed. Mr. Bodine was greatly distressed, I could see that. He continually thinks of you. He'll see that you won't be offended again."

The effect of Tarrant's rash action was most apparent upon the young man himself. The next day he met Marjorie face to face in the post-office and her manner confirmed the dark fears which he had entertained. She could not avoid seeing him, therefore she made no pretense of not doing so. Her face went white and then red as she looked at him, but it was the look in her eyes, a look of accusation and at the same time of sorrow, as if she had expected better things of him, that stung and hurt.

Tarrant was too young to take such things lightly. The impression which her beauty had made upon him at their first meeting had grown deeper day by day. His feeling toward her at first represented only the natural reaction of a youth smitten by a young girl's beauty. Had she been otherwise than what she was, or had his perceptions been

less acute, this feeling might have remained and the consequences of his conduct would have been insignificant.

But the few seconds when he had held her to his breast had been a revelation. His feeling had grown deeper, more serious and finer than the first surface impression. The memory of her face and the look in her eyes as she stood panting upon the hotel steps and spoke her final words haunted him. In that moment her soul was bare before him, and he had a glimpse of the paradise he had so recklessly thrown away.

The meeting at the post-office was a second blow to the young man. Again for a flash she had allowed her soul to gleam in her eyes. Tarrant went on down the street cursed with a haunting vision of what might have been. A sense of despair filled his being, and then inevitably his nature responded with a protest of recklessness. The mood of youth desperately hurt and condemning itself for its folly was upon him. Had he been less vital it is possible that he would have become weak and indifferent under its influence. The intensity and the fire of his nature precluded that. He grew grim and determined, and the recklessness which was inherent in him fired this mood into the hardness of steel. He sought relief from the haunting visions of Marjorie in the hectic poker games which now were a feature of the nights at Tin Spout. The wilder the game and the rougher the crowd the more he felt at ease. He saw himself as a man who had glimpsed a better and finer life than he had lived and who had deliberately proved that he had no right to such dreams. Each memory of Marjorie was a reproach to him. He felt his place to be among the low and brutalised element of which the town now had its full share.

Another man had gravitated to this class as inevitably as water seeks the lowest level. This was Grogan, the scar-faced man, who had been ordered off Tarrant's lease. He was to be seen but seldom on the street and then scarcely ever in the daytime. But wherever the vicious element congregated at night he was known. The hamlet already held more than its proportion of criminally inclined parasites. Grogan had usurped the position of leader from the day he first appeared. Some of his associates knew his record but those who were wise told no one. One such—a Mexican—was not wise, and suddenly he was missing from his haunts. It was understood that he was last seen one night going for a motor ride out on the prairie with Grogan, but no one cared to say so out loud.

"I tell you, Elmer, I don't savvy what's got into the boss lately," said Buck one morning on his return from town. "I go to town to look over the new waitress at Chili Joe's and she's over forty and hard on the eyes, so I decide I'll take my evening's dissipation caressing the ivories. I sneak round to Steve's Dump and shove my way up to the table and who do I see there but Spence, shooting a hundred at a clip and fading everybody in sight.

"But that ain't what gets me. He can gamble or leave it alone, of course. It's the way he looks. You know, Elmer, he don't belong in that sort of company. Well, he looked like he knew it, too, and didn't give a damn, and was ready to tell anybody to go to hell who asked him what he was doing there. And that ain't all either, by a long shot. That bad man, Grogan, is one of the crowd that holes up in Steve's. He and the boss never had no use for each other from the first go-off, but the way the

boss looks now he'll be inviting trouble if he sees it coming toward him, and if he keeps this up he and Grogan will bump sooner or later."

Elmer grew serious as he listened to the young driller's recital. He had written to his old partner of Mexican days, Alameda Slim, seeking possible information concerning Grogan, but as yet he had received no reply.

"I reckon Spence can take care of himself in most kinds of company," he mused. "Still, if this Grogan is what my memory wants to make him the boss ought to know."

One night as Tarrant sat at a poker table in Steve's Dump he heard a half-drunken voice behind him utter some words that drew his attention.

"Who? That girl he's running round with? Don't tell me! Bodine ain't wasting any time."

The words brought Tarrant up with a jerk. He looked round at the faces in the room. Not one but bore the marks of brutality and debasement. Worse than this, he realised, was that it was entirely natural to his present environment for such words to be uttered there as he had just heard.

"D'you know anything, Tex?" queried a bystander. "Or are you just talking with your mouth?"

"I know what I'm talking about, you betcha!" blurted the first speaker. "Ain't I got eyes? I'm a wise guy. I know 'em when I see 'em. That old bird Dickinson is just a blind, that's all. Gives out she's his daughter. Daughter hell! She's about as much his daughter as an 'oilman's secretary' is. Well, we know what an oilman's secretary is, eh, fellers?"

Tarrant went cold and hot. He laid down his cards and pushed back from the table. Slowly he turned round

till he faced the loose-mouthed fool and looked him in the eyes. The man was too drunk to understand the look, and, reading it for interest in his tale, he winked at Tarrant.

"Driving her round in his machine!" he chortled. "Dickinson's daughter! Ho!" And he went even beyond the bounds of loose talk among rough men.

Tarrant's grip on his throat choked the final filthy words before they were uttered.

"You skunk," said the oilman quietly, "you tell them you are a liar. Tell them every word you have said is a lie. Tell them you don't know a thing about what you have been talking."

He held the man pinned against the wall for a moment, and took his hands off him.

"Go ahead," he commanded coldly. "Tell them you lie."

The man was burly and young and there was considerable liquor in him, but before the fury of Tarrant's onslaught and the menace of his eyes he wilted at once.

"I was just joshing," he stammered with a sickly grin.

"You were lying. Tell them you lied."

"Well, if you call it a lie——"

"You don't know one thing about which you spoke."

"That's right. It was just a josh. Can't you take a joke?"

"You didn't want it believed?"

"Sure not. Sure not."

"And if I ever hear of your talking like this again——" Tarrant left the threat unfinished as the hulk of a man cowered abjectly. He looked at him a moment, looked

round the room. Then he thrust his way roughly out of the door.

"I wasn't only lying," said the sobered man, feeling his throat, "I was a damn fool besides for letting that guy hear me shoot off my mouth."

A few days later Grogan came up to Tarrant on the street.

"You're playing yourself pretty strong round here, feller," began the scarred man abruptly.

Tarrant looked at him in surprise. Then he caught the glint of excitement in Grogan's dark eyes, the tenseness of the man's whole body, and understood. The story of his handling of the drunken man had come to Grogan's ears and he was seeking to provoke an onslaught. Tarran't mind worked busily. Everything about Grogan bespoke the professional bad man. Resolved not to be led into a trap Tarrant asked mildly, "What's the idea?"

"The idea is you are overplaying yourself," replied Grogan, watching narrowly. "Unless maybe you figure to put your play through."

"You are still talking riddles to me," said Tarrant with a laugh. "Why not explain?"

A sneer came upon Grogan's lips as he understood that Tarrant was not to be drawn into a quarrel.

"And they told me you were hard!" he snarled. "Ha! A guy like you trying to buck Bodine's game!"

"I didn't know I was," came the passive reply.

"Well, if you didn't you sure made a bad play for yourself with your pinto the other evening," growled Grogan. "I'd call that bucking a game, my black self. What's the matter, got cold feet? Ain't you setting in?"

"Not unless I am dragged in," replied Tarrant.

"You'll be dragged in all right, unless you clear out," said Grogan. "I've got your brand now, you four-flush. Don't play yourself so strong round here any more or you'll be made to show-down."

Grogan was becoming clearer to Tarrant, but it remained for the letter from Alameda Slim, which finally reached Elmer to establish definitely the scarred man's status. It read:

DEL RIO, TEXAS.

Dear Elmer: How, old-timer! It sure was a treat to see your hen scratching and your Jno. Hancock and to hear from you way up North there in the new oil fields. Is it cold up there? I suppose you have made your stake? How is the grub?

Now you ask me about a man named Grogan which is on the prod against your boss, and you think you had seen him down below the river and do I know such a man? Well, Elmer, you called the turn when you played me to know about him, and he sure is a stiff citizen. Maybe I could tell you more about him if I was up there, but I am staying with a friend just now, and don't go out much except at night on acc't three hombres which jumped me one night and I had to hurt one hombre before he would let go. It was some time ago. Well, Elmer, this man Grogan worked for that man named Bodine, which had a oil company down near Tampico, and he certainly is one *muy malo* hombre. I mean Grogan, not Bodine, which is too slick to do it himself, but the other sure has got fangs. You don't say much about Bodine; I guess you forgot, eh, old-timer? Well, Elmer, I don't mean that Bodine is not a hard man himself; he sure was a hard one down there; he sure cleaned them investors and got away with a nice piece of money from the oil company he had, some said a couple hundred thousand. They make a hard pair to beat.

Well, I guess he will make it good in the oil business up north there, too. Why didn't you ask about Bodine, too, Elmer? He sure is a slick hombre, like I said, Elmer; and Grogan sure is a stiff citizen. When I say a man is hard you can believe it, eh, Elmer? He is Bodine's strong-arm guy. Bodine does the dealing and Grogan discourages the kickers. Don't play with them, Elmer, they are bad boys.

Well, I will go out and mail this when it is dark. Have you made a stake yet, old-timer? I sure was going good myself

until this trouble I told you about. It sure costs a lot, a thing like that, but he should have let go. Well, Elmer, if Bodine and Grogan is on the prod against your boss you tell him to play them close to his chest and watch Grogan's hands.

What are chances up north there and how is the grub? This will blow over soon, I mean my trouble. Well, Elmer, I sure was glad to do you a favor about Grogan. How are you? *Adios,* old-timer.

ALAMEDA SLIM.

CHAPTER XVII

TARRANT received the news concerning Grogan with something akin to satisfaction. The scarred man's relation to Bodine was fully established. He was the promoter's henchman. Too harsh and violent to be of use in the promotion end of the Syndicate, he yet was a valuable man in the organisation. Bodine possessed a clear brain and good powers of observation. These had told him that a man may not perform harsh, ruthless deeds against his fellow men without developing repellent traits of personality. A pleasing, dominant personality, which would attract and win the confidence of anyone, was a prime requisite in his field of endeavour.

Such a personality Bodine possessed in the extreme, and he guarded it and cultivated it and never permitted himself the performance of deeds which would reflect a scar upon its perfectly polished surface. Yet there were times, his activities being what they were, when such acts were necessary to his success. There were occasions when harsh methods paid best. Furthermore, a man whose career was what Bodine's was made enemies, and enemies in the oil fields of the time were not averse to violence.

So Grogan was a member of the Syndicate force. His connection was not open, nor were his duties publicly explained, but Tarrant had seen enough of him to realise that Alameda Slim's letter told the truth. He was satisfied. The dregs of self-reproach which he had quaffed since he had so recklessly swung Marjorie to his saddle

had turned to bitterness in his soul. He had resolved to seek her out again and apologise and attempt to explain the ebullition of spirit which had prompted the act, but he had seen her once again as she caught sight of him on the street, and the resolution had died. She had not looked away, neither had she flushed. Rather she had gone pale and cold, and every atom of her being had expressed silently her fateful words: "If you ever speak to me again may God punish you as you deserve!"

Tarrant saw her occasionally as one of a party consisting of herself and father, Mrs. Wayne and Wayne and Bodine in the latter's car. He heard tales of dinner parties for the five on the Stringer Roof Garden at Ranger Falls, and he strove in his bitterness to conjure up dark thoughts, sought to nourish the skepticism of his kind concerning women. But each time the picture of her, a clean, fine spirit, calling to what was clean and fine in him, rose out of the murk of his mood, and he was glad he was wrong—glad and bitter. The barrier was up between them. Like a fool he had played into Bodine's hands by permitting the wild boy in him to alienate her by one mad act.

Wherefore he found the presence of Grogan not unwelcome to his troubled spirit. When he met the scarred man he now made no effort to conceal the mood in which he stared at him. In truth there was no need for them to say aught to one another. Each understood. And Tarrant watched Grogan and Grogan watched Tarrant with the eyes of a hunter who is hunting and knows his quarry is hunting him. The result, however, instead of producing indications of an imminent clash were just the opposite. Bodine, apparently, had cautioned Grogan, for

the latter ceased his wanderings about the field in the vicinity of Tarrant's operations. He avoided Tarrant's producing wells and the wildcat, as well as Tarrant himself.

One Saturday night Tarrant stood alone before the shack which served him as office and sleeping quarters. A restlessness filled his being. His young blood ran hotly, and within him was an urge and a discontent which made him uneasy. Above him a troubled sky was illumined at intervals by the uncertain shimmer of heat lightning. About Tin Spout lay the great open plains, with their slightly rolling hills, measureless as the billows of a boundless sea.

Tarrant moved restlessly and his eyes were turned away from the town. Low down in the darkness, out on the country roads could be seen tiny lights streaking across the face of night like swift will-o'-the-wisps. They were motor cars, and as it was Saturday night Tarrant knew that most of them bore loads of prosperous, reckless oilmen bent upon the pursuit of the oil fields' hectic night pleasures. Tin Spout as yet did not provide these pleasures either in quantity or quality sufficient to satisfy the demand, hence a goodly portion of the field's population was on wheels to-night, proceeding swiftly whither such pleasures were to be obtained.

Tarrant drove his car down to the gasoline station in Tin Spout. Two gaging machines were at work pouring fuel into the tanks of cars and yet there was a jam at the station which forced Tarrant to wait long for his turn. He alighted from his car and walked forward.

"Lafe," said he sternly to the proprietor, "I suspect that

is Choctaw beer you are running into those tanks. It sure is too popular to be gasoline."

"If it was Choc, Spence," chuckled the garage man, wiping his brow, "I'd have this spigot in my mouth 'stead in this tank."

"Come on!" spoke a voice peremptorily. "Fill those road lice and give a real car a chance."

Bodine's great car came rolling up, and the chauffeur talked as he came.

"Make it be quick; my people are waiting. Fill 'er up to the snozzle. The emergency tank too. This will be an all-night party, I suspect. We're going over to the Country Club, and by the signs I guess we won't be back here till Monday A.M."

The chauffeur winked at the garage man in a manner which drew a query.

"Something special going with you?"

The chauffeur leaned forward confidentially.

"The new chicken," whispered he. "She's so innocent she thinks the Country Club is a country club."

"Just the two of them going?"

"Nix. Think he's a coarse worker?" said the chauffeur. "Wayne and his wife, too. Smooth stuff, you know. A nice little family party!"

As Tarrant walked back to his car a voice greeted him eagerly.

"Tarrant, Tarrant! I thought I see your car," said Old Man Swanson. "Boy, you look wild as a wildcat. Just like I feel. Don't give a demn for expense; going to have a good time to-night."

Tarrant leaned against his car and quietly recovered his poise.

"You darned old alcohol-drinking, snuff-chewing Scandihoovian," he drawled. "Haven't you got any respect for the few gray hairs you've got left? You ought to be living a different life, Swanson; ought to be giving young fellows like me advice, and setting an example and telling how hard you worked and how smart you were to make your fortune. Ain't you ever going to grow old?"

"I was old when I was young, Tarrant," bubbled the millionaire. "Worked like hal' all day long an' never looked at the *'brenvin.'* Then the country goes dry and I begin to drink and the boys hit oil on my ranch. To hal' with advice! Think I am demn hypocrite? What you doing to-night, Tarrant? You got a girl?"

Tarrant shook his head.

"You look hard, boy," said Swanson after a pause. "Where you going?"

"Why, I was thinking of running out to the Country Club, Swanson," replied Tarrant.

"Me too, Tarrant," said the old man, "though they rob you out there now. They rob you on the price of booze, and they rob you with a crooked wheel and a brace box, and if they don't get it all that way they put some demn dope in your drink and go through your pockets, and if you holler they give you the blackjeck and throw you out. It's a hell hole now."

"You seem to know all about it, old-timer," said Tarrant.

"Of course," was the unabashed retort. "Don't I go out there every night?"

"Ole, you'll never amount to anything, running round and frequenting disreputable resorts the way you do," drawled the young man.

"Nos-sir-ee! It was a demn nice place till that Grogan got hold of it and——"

"What!"

Tarrant's cloak of nonchalance was flung aside in a flash.

"Good cripes, Tarrant!" expostulated Swanson. "Don't scare me to death."

"Grogan—out there running the Country Club?"

"Certainly. Didn't you know?"

"Is he out there now—to-night?"

"Saturday night? Of course he is."

"Well," said Tarrant after a pause, "I reckon I ought to run out and see what it is like."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE wickedly famed establishment which existed under the name of the Country Club was out in the country, but with this its right to the use of the title ended. It was a long, one-story building set down on the plains so far from the habitations of mankind that it was considered to be beyond the law. Good roads and the motor car made it possible and profitable. The roads led from various cities and towns and oil fields, and the cars which came rolling thither nightly bore representatives of all classes of men to be found in the section. The cold-eyed financier and the lowly roughneck rubbed shoulders. The millionaire who was made yesterday sat at a table with the man who had gone broke the same day. Whisky was fifty dollars a quart. That was the only fact to be considered. If a man could and would buy this commodity at that price he was welcome, regardless of all else. He might be a criminal, a murderer, and often he was, but at the far-famed Country Club his money was as good as any man's in the realm.

The place was in reality built around a great dance floor. Booths and lightly partitioned rooms lined the wall. In the booths the dance-hall girls pursued the weary task of wiling drinks from the customers between dances, and in other rooms prevailed the whir and click of the roulette wheel, the rattle of chips and the hectic atmosphere of wild gambling.

Tarrant was no stranger to the Country Club, but his

visits had been infrequent, and as he noted the number and quality of the motor cars parked outside he saw that great changes had taken place. There was a new note in the cars, the crowd, everything. It was driven home to him that a new day had dawned in the oil fields. It was the day of the boom. New elements were present, heightening the pitch of frenzy which invariably obtained here on Saturday night. There had always been a number of valuable cars to be seen outside the Country Club at night, but now there were solid ranks of them. They were not merely expensive, but showy, the sort of cars driven by men flashily seeking to create an impression. As Tarrant thrust his way through the crowd which swarmed about the entrance he saw the men who owned these cars and he saw they were of the new element that had descended upon the oil fields. Keen, bold, crafty and well dressed, they presented a contrast to the red-faced, rough and hearty oilmen with whom they mingled.

Within the building a new, a tenser atmosphere seemed to prevail. The jazz was louder and wilder, the dance faster, the crowd more excited and more reckless in its abandon. The doors to the gambling rooms were open. Women gambled, their gowns bright spots of color among the duck or khaki of the men, their bursts of strained laughter shrill punctuation of the insistent male growl which rose from the throng.

Tarrant had driven recklessly and chosen short cuts and he had arrived in advance of Bodine and his party. He strolled forward, greeting Hennessy and other friends casually. A waiter motioned him to a booth where a girl sat waiting, but Tarrant merely smiled and went on. A roughneck, unshaven and bleary and red-clayed to the

knees, staggered into the booth and was greeted with a smile. Tarrant looked in the roulette room. A strange man was in charge. Strange men were in charge everywhere. He sensed this as part of the change. Hard-featured, brutalised men lounged about with the eyes of wolves. He saw the waiter pick the roughneck's pocket while the girl held his attention, then four of the hard-faced men made a rush and the roughneck was thrown out so expeditiously that he had not even time to make his protest heard.

"They can't get rough in here," said a head waiter with affected indignation. "They gotta behave."

A girl with bare arms came skipping across the floor to Tarrant.

"Hello, buddy," she said. "Going to dance?"

"I'm sorry, but I am not dancing," said Tarrant.

"But you're going to buy me a drink, aren't you?" she persisted mechanically.

"A soft drink?"

"Hell!" she said calmly. "You look like a live one, too."

Tarrant left the dance floor and entered the room devoted to stud poker. Here as elsewhere there was a new feverishness in the atmosphere. Men whom Tarrant recognised as old hands at the game were betting with the recklessness of men who were intoxicated. They were intoxicated, he decided, after looking on for a while. Every man there was intoxicated, even though he did not touch drink. Tarrant caught the significance of it all now, and he saw the sudden wealth of the oil fields as a hungry river of liquid gold, pouring up from the earth and engulfing all who came in its way; dazzling, luring, maddening them until in desperation they hurled them-

selves frantically into the heart of the current and were swept away by the power of the rich, crude oil.

Then he caught sight of Bodine. The promoter had just entered, and as he stood surveying the room he smiled, but shook his head. Tarrant worked his way toward the door as a head waiter came hurrying obsequiously up to Bodine.

"Got a nice booth for you over in the corner, Mr. Bodine," he heard the waiter say. "Fix it up with a curtain in front if you say so."

Bodine shook his head, while smiling appreciatively at the scene on the floor.

"No, Joe, I'm afraid this would be a little too much of a treat for my company all at once," he said with a laugh. "Yes, just a little bit too strong for a starter. Where is Grogan?"

"He is in the office, Mr. Bodine."

"All right. Tell him I want the private room, and tell him to make it his own particular business to see that nobody intrudes on us."

"Yes, sir. How many in the party, Mr. Bodine?"

"Four," said the promoter, "but the other pair will be dancing most of the time."

The effect of Bodine's words on Tarrant was akin to that of an explosive.

"Like a charge of nitro on the cap rock," he thought afterwards. Even as the released forces of gas and oil rush to the surface at the smash of the explosive, so Tarrant felt the old recklessness in him, the combined intensity and devil-may-careness which in earlier days might have made him a killer, welling up within him and craving expression. He yearned for violence. His mood just

then was the mood of a bad man with the fighting lust upon him. He was in no fog; no poison of anger clouded his brain. On the contrary his sense of perception was abnormally keen and alert. The smirk of the oily-faced head waiter, even the sneak's poise of the man's head as he hurried across the floor, told their tale to him.

He saw Grogan appear promptly at the waiter's summons. Grogan was in his shirt sleeves. Tarrant noted the fact, noted that there was no bulge upon Grogan's hip or elsewhere upon his person, and appraised these facts at their proper value. He was carrying his own coat upon his arm at the time, but now he put it on. The advantage was with him. And yet this knowledge did not satisfy him. The desire for violence, not for a mere triumph, was too strong within him. He regretted for the while his responsibilities. He wished himself entirely free, with no duties toward his stockholders, toward his properties, toward anyone or anything, to be fulfilled. Bodine's words were a taunt and a goad. He seemed to be choking.

"Tarrant, Tarrant, have a drink, have a drink!" cried Old Man Swanson.

Tarrant thrust him aside.

"To hell with your drink!" he said thickly.

"Stewed!" stammered Swanson. "I knew something was wrong."

Grogan had unlocked a door near the roulette room and was standing before it, waiting.

"Stop the jazz!" he ordered. "Clear the floor. Stop the rough stuff."

The head waiter and his cohorts spread swiftly to obey the order. The orchestra stopped playing abruptly. Dancers were hustled off the floor, and noisy celebrants

were roughly quieted. The room achieved a momentary appearance of decorum. Bodine had entered and was swiftly ushering his party toward the door Grogan was guarding. Tarrant saw Marjorie start as she looked round. Bodine's hand was upon her arm and he laughed assuringly.

"Just a little dance party," said Bodine. "Isn't it, Wayne?"

"Just a nice little dance party," agreed Wayne fatuously.

Marjorie hesitated. A dance-hall girl had projected herself into her field of vision, and the abbreviated costume of her profession was startling.

"A costume dance," purred Bodine.

"Yes, yes. Costume dance," echoed Wayne. "Isn't it, my dear?"

"Yes, of course," tittered Mrs. Wayne. "Besides, we'll be all alone, dearie. For goodness sake, come on!"

Marjorie had definitely halted. She had freed her arm from Bodine's hand and was staring about her.

"But you said it was a country club!" she exclaimed. "You said——"

"It's Saturday night!" laughed Bodine. "The members get a little playful. Come along."

"Dearie, you don't for a minute fancy I would be here if it wasn't perfectly all right, do you?" demanded Mrs. Wayne.

"Nice, quiet little crowd," said Wayne.

Marjorie looked round. The crowd was quiet. For the moment no improprieties were apparent. Mrs. Wayne she knew to be, if not a particularly intelligent, at least, a good woman.

"Step in—this way, please," said the head waiter, bowing obsequiously before the open door of the private room.

It was the last he remembered for several minutes, for as he turned a hard fist struck him on the jaw and he tumbled headlong into the private room.

"Grogan," came Tarrant's challenge icily, "I am calling you."

The blow and the sound of a man falling ruined Grogan's orders to keep the place quiet. A cry rose from the crowd. It became a roar.

"Fight—fight!" rang the cries. "Jazz it up. Ee-yow." The pent-up intoxication of the crowd vented itself in a wild outburst. Men shouted and laughed. Women screamed hysterically. A drunken roughneck smashed a bottle on the floor. A bouncer struck him, a fight started, and in a moment a dozen men were embroiled. Curses rose above the sound of blows, and a girl all by herself with a whisky bottle in her hand, stood upon a table and dared anyone to touch her, just dare to touch her!

The fight about the drunken roughneck had been made possible because a majority of the bouncers had run toward Tarrant and consequently were not at their posts to suppress the disorder when it began.

"Grogan, I am calling you," said Tarrant, and the bouncers stopped.

Grogan's countenance was a study. All the feral characteristics of the man had asserted themselves and found expression in his face. It was the face of an enraged tiger, slit eyed, bare toothed, deadly, but a tiger cornered and afraid to spring. The automatic movement of his hands, the thumbs curved out, toward his flanks, and the

look of defeat in his eyes as his hands found nothing, betrayed him.

"They are not there, Grogan," said Tarrant in the same deadly tone. "Why don't you wear a coat?"

Grogan's eyes leaped with fear at the words. His gaze flashed to the left breast of Tarrant's loose coat, at the oilman's right hand, and his mouth closed and came open with a gasp. His hands rose helplessly to a level with his ears.

"What you after me for?" he gasped.

The bouncers were sneaking toward Tarrant's back, but Old Man Swanson and Jim Hennessy and a dozen oilmen came roughly to the fore.

"Bodine, Bodine," said the old man, "this is your fault. This girl should not be here. You know that. Don't give a demn for expense," he exploded as a bouncer snarled at him. "Going to see fair play here to-night!"

Marjorie had drawn back at the clash between Tarrant and Grogan. The full import of the scene was hidden to her, but instinctively she sensed what the others understood from experience. Courageous as she was she quailed before this. Her whole being revolted. She felt weak and alone and faint.

"Come." There was a rough arm about her waist, supporting her, leading her toward the door. She was not conscious whose arm it was, but it was strong and friendly and she leaned upon it gratefully. She felt herself being helped into a car, and the open air revived her.

"Wait, wait!" she cried.

"Don't you worry, miss," said Hennessy, the well shooter. "I'm no angel, but I will see you out of this."

"But I don't know you," she faltered.

"I am a friend of Spence Tarrant's," said Hennessy, "and I have daughters of my own."

"But he—Mr. Tarrant——"

Hennessy grinned as he threw in the clutch.

"Don't worry," said he tersely, "Spence won't hurt them."

Within the room Tarrant had backed across the floor and stood in the doorway, grimly facing the sullen crowd. The tension had risen to the breaking point. And then the crowd gasped, stood frozen dumb, dazed. Tarrant flung wide the sides of his coat, and showed that there was no weapon beneath; there was nothing but a pongee silk shirt. And then he smiled and vanished in the night.

CHAPTER XIX

HENNESSY drove swiftly and in silence until he had put a good distance between them and the Country Club, then he reduced the speed and threw his gray head back with a shout of laughter.

"By golly, that boy Tarrant is a corker!" he confided to the world in general. "Young lady, I reckon you didn't get his scheme?"

"His—scheme?" repeated Marjorie in bewilderment.

"Sure!" roared the old man. "You didn't think he was doing that for fun, did you?"

"I didn't know—how could I know what he was doing it for?" said the girl. "It was a quarrel, was it not? That is all I saw. Oh, it was terrible—terrible——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded the well shooter. "It was terrible! Oh, sure, it was terrible. He's a terrible guy!"

"Mr. Bodine said he was—drunk?" said she timidly.

"*Drunk?* Tarrant?" snapped Hennessy. "Only time I see him drunk was two years ago, time of the big camp meeting at Tin Spout, and then we all got laid out on one drink because the stuff the bootleggers sold us was doped. No, sir—young lady, that isn't his style. No drinking man could pull off a slick trick like that."

"A trick?" repeated Marjorie. "I don't understand."

"Miss," said Hennessy, "when you come out there you—you didn't know what sort of a place it was, did you?"

"No," she replied with a shudder. "They—Mr. Bodine and Wayne—said it was a country club."

The well shooter drove in silence for a full minute.

"Poor Wayne!" he said grimly. "Well, Spence Tarrant saw you didn't know—same as the rest of us did. Miss, there was a rough crowd out there to-night, but I'm telling you there was a whole lot of men sore to see you there and sore at a certain party. But the difference was that Spence had brains enough to do something. He didn't want to see you to stay there, in that private room, same as we didn't; and he jumped Grogan just to give you time to get a good look and—make up your mind about staying or not. I seen him when he drove up. He had his coat off then.

"I've seen a few nervy things in my day, miss," continued Hennessy. "Man running a torpedo business does. I see a well blow herself in with a shell full of nitro halfway down the casing and the shooter stood by and caught the shell when she shot up. But to walk up to Grogan, with his gang of thugs and high jackets round him and to bluff him *without a gun*—miss, when you get old you can tell your grandchildren once upon a time you saw a *man!*"

Marjorie's thoughts and emotions were in a tumult. She huddled back in the seat and was glad that the darkness hid her face. The shock of the scene at the Country Club was still upon her. The barrenness of the prairie night through which they were driving oppressed her with a sense of loneliness, even helplessness. But above all, though she refused to admit it even to herself, there ran a memory which thrilled her and sent the red in waves to her cheeks. She had known this emotion once before, and then as now it was intermingled with anger and a sense of humiliation and even shame. Why, oh why, should the sight of him bring it back so vividly! Why

the spectacle of Tarrant ready to engage in a—a brawl—stir her so? Why should it bring back the strange moment which had come to her that day after he had—she searched her mind indignantly for the proper phrase—when he had played the brute? A blush mantled her countenance and she turned away from Hennessy in spite of the darkness.

"You look a little tired, miss," said Hennessy kindly as he helped her out at the hotel in Tin Spout. "Don't you let it pester you. Unpleasant things is bound to happen to the best of us. Chalk it up to experience, that's my system."

"But such an experience!" said Marjorie with a shudder.

"It was tough," agreed Hennessy. "But even so, you can figure a profit in it. Folks who never went out to the Country Club with Bodine don't know just what he or it is."

Marjorie went to her father's room and knocked. Dickinson opened the door. The floor of his room was strewn with newspapers, and he was considerably excited.

"I tell you, Marjorie," he exclaimed, expressing the thought in his mind regardless of her appearance, "oil is the greatest thing in the world just at present. Look at those papers. Not a one of them but has an item about the great fortunes being made in oil. Look here, here's a long article about Adair. The new Rockefeller they call him. Began just as I am doing, with an investment in oil. Now owns refineries, pipe lines; millionaire many times over; one of the big, strong men of the country. A young man, too; like Bodine——"

"Daddy," said Marjorie quietly. She was sitting with

her chin in her hands, looking blankly before her, obviously unconscious of his remarks.

"Eh?" said Dickinson absently. "And the real boom in the oil business has only begun. Look where the price is to-day; two dollars a barrel, and the refiners offering a premium of twenty-five cents. Look at the way the automobile factories are turning out cars. We'll have a nation on wheels. All have got to buy gasoline, and who will profit most? Oil! That's it. It's big, big——"

"Were you ever out at the Country Club?" asked Marjorie flatly.

"Eh, what?" Dickinson faltered in full flight and stared at her over his glasses. "What say, Marjorie?"

She repeated her question.

"H'm," said her father.

"With Mr. Bodine?"

"H'm," said Dickinson again.

Marjorie lifted her face and looked up at him.

"Daddy, why did you allow Mr. Bodine to take me out to that place this evening?" she asked.

"Bodine—Bodine is here, isn't he, Marjorie?" asked Dickinson anxiously.

"No," she said; "I left him when I saw what sort of a place it was. A man named Hennessy drove me home."

"What?" Dickinson threw out his arms and began to pace the floor. "You haven't offended Bodine, I hope, Marjorie? You haven't done that. Why—why you mustn't—you mustn't antagonise him. Think what a chance he is giving me. A chance to get up among the big men of the country. You wouldn't spoil my chance, would you, Marjorie?"

The girl rose.

"Are you going to answer my question?" she asked coldly. "Why did you let me go with him out to that place?"

"Why, great Scott, Marjorie, there was no harm done," he stammered indignantly. "Don't you think I know what is best for you? Don't you think I do my best for you? I hope you haven't seriously offended Mr. Bodine? Great Scott! Tell me about it."

"Since you prefer not to answer me, I won't stay any longer," she said. "Mr. Bodine will tell you about it, I suppose. Good-night, daddy."

She went slowly to her room, but she made no preparation to retire. Seated on the side of her bed she folded her arms and sat staring at the floor. Her father's words, inspired by his quickened greed, obtruded new thoughts upon her. She had seen how the craze for oil wealth had affected men, driving them into a frenzy, sweeping them off their feet, engulfing them in a sudden madness. Was she, too, caught in this oil craze? Was she merely a pawn in the great game being played for the stakes of liquid gold?

She lost track of time as she sat and pondered. It grew late, but people gave but little time for sleep at Tin Spout then, so the hotel did not grow quiet, though midnight approached and passed. "I must know," she murmured. "I will make him tell me."

She went down the hall to her father's room. The door was ajar and as she peered in she halted. Bodine and her father were together and the promoter's heavy voice was audible in the hall.

"Tarrant started a row, that's all," he was saying easily. "I have given up trying to use him. Wish we could. He

could make a lot of money for us. But there is no chance. We'll get rid of him. He will have to leave this field."

"I knew him for a ruffian the moment I laid eyes on him," babbled Dickinson.

"He's the best oilman here," said Bodine coldly. "That's why I put up with him as long as I have, hoping we could use him. Now he is through here. We'll send him out of here with nothing but his bare hands."

"And serve him right, too!" added Dickinson. "The quicker we are rid of him the better."

"Don't worry; it won't be long," said Bodine with a laugh as he turned to go. "You won't forget to explain to Marjorie?"

"Leave that to me, Mr. Bodine," interrupted the doctor unctuously. "I assure you she understands. Yes, yes; she is a clever girl—she understands."

Marjorie fled to her room and locked herself in. Tears of shame and helplessness came to her eyes. She saw herself as a pawn—a pawn in the mad game of oil! Doctor Dickinson was right: she did understand.

Elmer's reaction to the affair was characteristic. He went directly to the office which the Pan-National Syndicate had opened at Tin Spout. A clerk halted him at the door of the president's sanctum, but Bodine, recognizing the old man's voice, called heartily: "Come in!"

"Sit down. Have a cigar," said the promoter. "What is on your chest?"

"Hair," said Elmer, and looked at him with his faded blue eyes. Bodine returned the scrutiny unmoved.

"Old man," said he presently, "I wish you were working for me."

"Hell!" exploded Elmer. "Slim was right: this one is a stiff citizen, too. Hombre, I ain't working for you, and I don't aim to; and I am working for Spence Tarrant, and I ain't so old but what my eyes are good and I know a hired gunman when I see one. Bodine, I came here to give you notice: if this thing comes back on Tarrant *I* start hunting *you*."

"I still maintain I wish you were working for me," returned Bodine imperturbably.

"And I'm a good hunter, Bodine," the old man went on, "and I know all about you and Grogan down at Tampico."

A glimmer of surprise flickered the steadiness of the promoter's gaze for an instant.

"And Tarrant knows!" continued Elmer. "Yes, by the lord Harry! He knew what Grogan was, and he bucked him without a gun. That means a come-back, unless you whisper a word to Grogan. Better do it, Bodine. There ain't enough of me left to be careful about. I'm depending on you to see that it won't be necessary for me to lay off the job and turn you into about two hundred pounds of spoiled meat."

CHAPTER XX

AN accident to the string of tools used in drilling the wildcat well engrossed all of Tarrant's energy and attention for the next few days. Fifteen hundred feet down in the earth, at the bottom of the tiny hole, the huge steel bit was jarred loose and the progress of the well was halted while the nerve-wrecking job of "fishing" was begun. Somehow the heavy piece of steel must be hooked and drawn to the surface. Unless this could be accomplished the rig must be moved and a new hole be started.

Tarrant's means at this time were so low as to make it entirely out of the question for him to begin a new well. Coincident with the boom price of crude oil had been the rise of the expense of drilling. In the frantic scramble to bring in wells while oil was up, operators did not stop to check their expenditures so long as the drills went downward. The wages of ordinary laborers—the "roughnecks" as they are known in the oil field—rose by leaps to ten dollars a day. Skilled labor advanced in proportion, drillers being paid as high as twenty-five dollars.

Tarrant had plunged to the limit of his finances when he had resolved upon drilling the No. 5 well beyond the proved depth in hope of striking a deep oil sand. His producing wells at Tin Spout would furnish him revenue sufficient to drill close to two thousand feet if the work progressed steadily. The completion of Well No. 5 depended upon recovering the lost drill promptly.

News of the accident spread in spite of Tarrant's efforts

to keep it secret. The fishing job at the well came to be one of the most discussed subjects in the field. The stockholders who had requested Tarrant to amalgamate with the Syndicate heaped unlimited vituperation upon his head. A few weeks before they had accounted Tarrant a friend and a leader. Now they saw him as a stubborn fool, an anarchist, a swindler.

As his standing in the community decreased and vanished the position of Bodine rapidly became stronger. He became the dominant figure. The citizens looked up to him because they felt he would bring them money. Then he made a stroke which won him further respect. Word was passed about that Tarrant's wildcat was ruined beyond hope of recovery. Rather than see his friends suffer a total loss the Syndicate accepted each share of No. 5 stock as the equivalent of a 50 per cent payment on a share of stock in the Pan-National Syndicate. The response to this offer was such that Bodine soon held all of the outstanding stock in Tarrant's well. Then, one afternoon, word was mysteriously flashed through Tin Spout that brought a shock to many. Fortune had favoured Tarrant. The drill was recovered and drilling had been resumed.

Tarrant sat in his shack at Tin Spout that night tired and silently jubilant over the good fortune by which the obstacle had been overcome. Upon his return to town he had found more good news. One of his small wells which had steadily shown signs of going dry had, for no apparent reason, taken on a new lease of life, and the figures which his pump man handed him were a grateful surprise. His income was considerably increased.

"We're filling the big tank, Mr. Tarrant," said the engi-

neer. "And high-gravity crude took another two-bit jump."

"That's fine," said his employer heartily.

"Don't let anything happen to the pumps. I need every cent they produce as fast as they can pump it."

The engineer had departed for the pump house but a few minutes when a timid knock sounded on the door of the shack. Tarrant looked up and to his surprise saw the dark face of the Mexican youth Ramos, who had been discharged from the crew of No. 5. The boy had a pair of mud-covered oil boots under his arm and Tarrant shook his head.

"No job, Ramos," said he. "We don't need anybody."

"No, no, Señor Tarrant!" said the Mexican, smiling. "I no come for job. I come from Señor Buck to tell Señor Tarrant to come to the new well pronto, and bring the harpoon because the cable it is broke. *Si.*"

"What?" gasped Tarrant.

"*Si.* It is Señor Buck say I tell Señor Tarrant that," continued the Mexican. "I go out and ask Señor Buck can I get my boots which I leave. *'Si,'* say Señor Buck; and he give me the five dollar and say I tell Señor Tarrant come out pronto and bring the harpoon because the cable it is broke."

"Is the well shut down?" asked Tarrant in a hard voice.

"*Si, si!*" came the reply. "All shut down."

Tarrant loaded the heavy harpoonlike tool used in spearing broken cable into his car and drove furiously out to the lease. As he drew near the well his heart leaped, for the familiar sounds from the machinery told him the drill was running.

"How about it?" he shouted as he came to a stop beside the platform. "How did you get going again?"

Elmer, who was in charge of the night tower, looked at him strangely.

"We ain't been shut down since you left," he said.

Questions and explanations followed swiftly.

"Ramos? He ain't been here since I canned him. Never had any boots. Think of a *chola* running a windy like that!"

"He didn't," said Tarrant bitterly. "He was merely repeating what he had been told. He was just a stalking horse for someone who wanted me out of town."

The men of the day tower came tumbling out, Buck in the lead.

"Mebbe they meant to lay for you along the road," suggested Buck.

"They would have got me coming out if that was it," retorted Tarrant. "No, it wasn't that." A chill ran through him at a sudden thought. "The wells—at Tin Spout!"

He swung the car round sharply.

"Pile in—Buck and the day tower!" he commanded. "We are going to Tin Spout! Keep your eye peeled, Elmer."

"Let's go!" cried the men, tumbling into the car. Hanging on for dear life they shouted as the drive toward town began: "Step on 'er, boss; give 'er the gas!"

Tarrant drove like a madman.

All eyes were turned ahead, straining to pierce the darkness. The car topped a rise. The Tin Spout field at the town was in sight, and at what was to be seen there Tarrant's men cursed as one.

A billowing glare of flame had split the black night ahead. Tarrant needed no one to tell him whence the flame came. He knew the location of every derrick and jack and tank in the field in the dark and there could be no mistake: the flame was from his best producing well, which was the well nearest to Tin Spout's buildings.

The pumpman met him as he drove up to the well, and the man's head was bloody and his face white with anger.

"Knocked me out from behind!" he roared. "When I came to—they had used dynamite! Blew the jack to hell!"

"We will snuff it!" said Tarrant. "Get me a couple of sticks of dynamite. Boys, there's a coil of wire cable by the engine house; straighten it out and bring it here."

He fastened the dynamite in the middle of the long wire cable and attached a short fuse and cap. Under his directions the men picked up the ends of the cable, drew it as taut as they could, and walked toward the fire. The cable was of sufficient length to enable the men at each end to avoid the thick, gaseous flames which covered the site of the well.

"Now—in with it, boys!" shouted Tarrant.

The men swung the cable and the dynamite went into the heart of the fire. Simultaneously there was an explosion. The solid hood of flame and smoke was blown into a thousand splattering drops of fire, but still the fire in the well burned. Three times the manœuver was repeated in vain, but at the fourth attempt the explosion effectively snuffed out every vestige of fire.

"Seal it—seal, it quick, boys!" shouted Tarrant.

The men threw themselves at the task and it was soon done and the well sealed against danger of further fire.

"Tarrant," panted Buck, "you're an oilman!"

For a moment they stood, panting, scorched, but victorious, and then the earth trembled with the force of another explosion.

"Damn 'em!" shrieked Buck. "They got the tank!"

The storage tank, filled with crude oil, had been shattered by a charge of explosive, and its contents, spilling out upon the ground, almost instantly had been converted into a roaring, leaping river of liquid fire.

CHAPTER XXI

IF they want that game they can have it," cried Tarrant.

A storage tank belonging to the Syndicate well loomed up in the darkness, and with a box of dynamite under his arm and a burning fuse in his hand he ran toward it.

"Stop!" shouted a guard. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

"Shoot and be damned!" cried Tarrant. "There's dynamite enough here to blow us both to bits!"

The guard ran. Tarrant placed his charge beneath the tank and retreated to a place of safety. Again the earth quavered like jelly. The tank leaped into the air. Great gouts of fire spattered the landscape. And another roaring river of fire joined, spread itself over the earth, consuming all that it came in contact with.

"Even so far!" shouted Tarrant. "Their next play!"

"They have done it!" screamed Buck, placing his mouth close to Tarrant's ear to make himself heard above the roaring flame. "They have pulled the cap off the casing of hell! Look!"

Tarrant's storage tank, which had been blown up, stood on a slight slope which ran directly down to Tin Spout's street of shacks. The burning oil following the line of least resistance, had rolled down the slope, hissing and roaring like some primordial beast bereft of its tongue, a ruthless river of flame which there was no damming, no resisting. A derrick in its path had become a colossal beacon which lighted up the scene; a tool house was swallowed at one roaring gulp. The oil was burning itself out as it went, but fiery trickles, racing ahead of the

main body, had reached the street and the first buildings already were afire.

Tin Spout was destined to be a feast for any fire that started there. Oil-soaked timbers lay about everywhere. There were even pools of crude oil in the hollows. And the tinder-dry wooden buildings of the town stood side by side, ready to burn like so much prepared kindling.

The crackling rivulets of oil reached three separate buildings simultaneously and in a moment three separate fires, soon to be blended into one, were raging fiercely. The shrieks and cries of human beings strove in vain to pierce the steady brawl of the oil-fed flames. A gasoline tank blew up. Fat blobs of fire fell upon tinder-dry roofs; and the street of Tin Spout immediately became a flame-illumined bedlam.

Tarrant ran swiftly into the town. More gasoline tanks were blowing up. The sudden flares had the effect of so many explosions. The flash and roar of a new outburst illumined and stunned; and the intervals were dark by contrast, though the destruction of everything inflammable within reach of the flames continued steadily.

"It's hell!" cried a man's voice thickly. "It's hell and I'm in the middle of it!"

Tarrant recognised the voice and the figure staggering aimlessly about, and cried out as he sprang forward.

"Wayne!" he shouted. He caught him by the shirt front and shook him furiously. "Where is Miss Dickinson? What are you doing here without your wife?"

Wayne recognised his captor and shrieked above the roar of the flames:

"And here's the devil that did it! Tarrant, you're the devil that turned this hell loose, you——"

"Wayne!" cried Tarrant. "You're drunk!"

"Drunk?" said Wayne. "No, sir. I'm in hell, I tell you—oh, my God!" A breath of sanity blew over him. "Honey—honey—she's still back there!"

"Back where! Sober up or I'll smash you. Back where?"

"Chili Joe's hotel. I forgot all about her. Honey and Marjorie! I——"

Tarrant threw him to one side and ran on. A man recognised him.

"You——!" he shouted threateningly. "This is your doing!"

Tarrant struck savagely and leaped over him. Men were pouring out of Chili Joe's hotel in various stages of unarray, while others were making a futile attempt to save the building. A blob of burning oil fell with a flop on the roof and the dry shingles seemed to explode in flame. At an open window in the second floor appeared a figure in white, the figure of a woman, her ashen face maddened by fright.

"Mrs. Wayne!" whispered someone. "She's gone!"

The woman had turned back from the window. Tarrant sprang for the stairs which ran up the side of the building, and half a dozen men sprang with him. They jammed at the first step and a heavy elbow jolted him beneath the ear.

"Damn you! Go first then if you're so eager," said Tarrant; and then he saw that the man was Bodine.

But Bodine did not follow with a rush up the stairs. He halted and stood, looking up. The fat light of the flames was upon his upturned countenance, and his expression had suddenly become tigerish. Tarrant fol-

lowed the direction of his glance and stood frozen. A wave of humility swept over him; he felt abased, unworthy, as if he were committing sacrilege by lifting his eyes. And he looked away.

Two women stood on the top stair and Marjorie was one of them. The flame of a blazing derrick was like a sun behind her, gleaming lustrously upon her hair, glinting upon the sheen of her silken garment, and ruthlessly and rosily revealing the budding girl body beneath the sheer silk of her nightgown.

Her arms were full of clothes which she had not had time to don, for Mrs. Wayne had become hysterical with fright and Marjorie had been forced to draw her to safety with no delay. The fright-crazed woman had clutched at Marjorie and torn her gown, and the girl's rounded virginal shoulder glowed like rosy ivory in the light of the dancing flames. The shouts of the men at the foot of the stairs died down into an awed silence. Some looked away, some stared, and a curious change came over their faces; one or two fumblingly removed their hats. Bodine's lips parted. His eyes feasted gloatingly upon the spectacle above him, and the look of a drunkard crept into his eyes. He gathered himself for the spring upward. Then the flaming derrick fell in a heap and the stairway was plunged in momentary darkness. The moment was busily employed by Marjorie, and when the timbers of the fallen derrick again flared into light she was revealed arranged in a hastily donned skirt and a dressing gown from beneath which peeped her bare feet and ankles.

The light also revealed Tarrant well up the stairway, for fearful that the sudden darkness meant disaster he

had pushed past Bodine and groped toward the two women.

"Take Mrs. Wayne!" cried Marjorie.

Tarrant swept the hysterical woman off her feet and carried her to the ground. Wayne was waiting there and received his wife while Tarrant turned back to the hotel.

The brief moment upon the stairs had been fateful to him. The light and his lofty position both had made him the cynosure of all eyes, and as he was recognised a medley of angry cries punctuated the roar of the flames. Angry men surged toward him threateningly. Those in the rear shook their fists and urged the others on, but those nearest the foot of the stairs were inclined to hang back, for Tarrant had turned upon them and he was not pleasant to face.

Bodine sought to mount the stairs to Marjorie, but the sudden congestion of the crowd thwarted him and he was forced against the building at Tarrant's side and held there by the pressure of numbers. The destruction of the town and the danger from the flames were forgotten for an instant by the raging crowd. It had ceased for the nonce to be a crowd and had become a mob, swayed and driven by the primitive, brainless savagery which is called mob-spirit.

"Lynch him!" howled a voice.

And other voices spoke thus:

"Get him! It's Tarrant!"

"He's the devil that did this!"

"Get him now! He's responsible for the fire!"

Promptly upon this last howl a clear, sane voice rang out:

"He is not!"

Marjorie had stopped halfway down the stairs. The flames had reached the top of the stairway now, but her countenance as she bent over the mob revealed no fear, no concern for herself, only an expression of indignation at a false accusation and injustice.

"I know he is not responsible!" she cried. The mob, being brainless, was silenced by her imperiousness.

"I know who is responsible for the fire!" she cried. "Shall I tell what I know?"

The last words seemed to galvanise Bodine into action.

"Come, come, gentlemen!" he broke out, facing the mob leaders. "We can't have any of this."

His personality—the personality of the superpromoter—rose to the occasion.

"Nobody is responsible for the fire," he went on. Perhaps his audience stared at him with an expression of surprise, but his personality was dominant. "It was an act of Providence. It has made us all rich. Go away, gentlemen. Don't waste any more time here. This fire has made our boom. We have been handed a million dollars' worth of publicity at the cost of a few thousand dollars' worth of buildings. A million dollars' worth! Think of it! Priceless publicity. This is news. Publicity of the kind that could not be purchased. It is what we needed. Tin Spout is made!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE fire had truly come like a gift from the gods—or the devil—to Bodine and his associates of the Pan-National Syndicate. The syndicate had not foreseen the extent of the forces it had loosed, for it had not properly estimated Tarrant's resources nor his inclination to prompt and violent retaliation when attacked. Bodine had not foreseen the burning of Tin Spout. When, however, the burning oil from Tarrant's storage tank had trickled down the slope and converted what was to have been a small oil well fire into something resembling a holocaust, the promoter promptly envisioned the opportunity which the event had presented.

While Tin Spout's populace was running fearfully into the street he was planning a campaign which would adequately utilise the potential publicity which he now had in his grasp. Marjorie's sudden declaration in Tarrant's defence had necessitated a premature announcement of the golden vision which had unrolled itself to him; but even while his hands and tongue were busy dispersing the mob his mind was active with the elaboration and development of the campaign he had instantly planned.

The mob was dumbfounded. The promoter's vision was too swift for it to follow. Had a lesser personality than Bodine sought to gloss over Marjorie's outburst with such an announcement he would have failed. Bodine, however, knew he would not fail. This degree of confidence was part of his equipment. The other qualities

of the successful promoter, the supersalesman who thrives upon the feat of dazzling his fellow beings and convincing them that it is advisable to give him their money, were his in no lesser degree, and as he exercised them there in the glare of the burning hotel the mob spirit was shattered in the throng before him; it became a loose gathering of rather aimless individuals, and Bodine, mentally occupied with other plans, dazed and drove them, dispersed them to the last man.

Tarrant stood grimly watching him, and despite all that had gone before he was sensible of an actual admiration for the feat. There was sufficient similarity between the two men to make this possible. Tarrant, too, had the big man's faculty of sinking petty considerations when the opportunity of accomplishment presented itself, and he could admire the quality in another man. For the nonce he forgot the rivalry and struggle between Bodine and himself and saw only the man's capacity.

"Bodine," he drawled, "you sure would do to take along if you were straight."

But Bodine was too exalted by his vision to permit himself to descend to crass personalities.

"Get in on it, Tarrant!" he said tensely. "Let bygones be bygones. This fire puts us on the map in red letters."

"What kind of a man are you?" responded Tarrant slowly. "After everything——"

"What's all that got to do with business?" snapped Bodine. "It is a good business for the Syndicate to have you in it. It is good business for you to be in the Syndicate. You are a business man. Don't complicate a plain business proposition with—with other considerations."

At the last words the two turned as if by instinct to-

ward Marjorie. She was gone. Tarrant ran down the street. By the light of a burning building he saw her helping Wayne place Mrs. Wayne in a service car, and he heaved a sigh of relief when the car, bearing the two and Marjorie rolled away from the burning hamlet—and Bodine.

Bodine had had his answer. He wasted no more time on Tarrant. To do him justice he wasted no more thought upon him, nor upon himself, nor any consideration that was not directly connected with the exploitation of the present opportunity.

A pair of men with a wet tarpaulin were guarding the box car which served as the railroad station. When a blot of burning oil fell upon the roof they sprang up a ladder and smothered the flames with the tarpaulin. When flying embers alighted against the walls they slid down from their perch and performed again. Meanwhile they commented upon the destruction.

"There goes the church."

"Let 'er go."

"Lafe's garage is a cinder."

"Serves him right."

"Pool parlor's done for."

"Gosh! Hope they got the liquor out."

"Chili Joe's is done for."

"It is? Where we going to get breakfast to-morrow morning?"

There were charred holes in the roof and walls of the box car and cinders were sifting in when Bodine arrived, but the telephone and the telegraph were intact and the operator was present, and Bodine went to work without the delay of a moment or the loss of any waste motion.

The day before Tin Spout had been only an insignificant hamlet in the midst of a rather poor little oil field. So far as the great public was concerned it did not exist at all. But next morning it existed. It had been created overnight. The people of the land now knew about it. They knew it was a rich oil town. They knew it was the centre of a rich oil field. They knew all this because the type in the morning papers told them so, and the people believed that newspaper publication creates a fact.

MILLION DOLLAR OIL WELL BURNS AT TIN SPOUT, TEXAS

SKIES AFLAME AS OIL WELL BURNS. TIN SPOUT, TEXAS, TREATED TO RARE SPECTACLE

OCEAN OF FLAMING OIL FLOWS IN STREETS OF TIN SPOUT, TEXAS

The heads under which the story appeared in the regular press next morning were too numerous and varied to be represented by a selection. It was legitimate news. In the less regular press, in the oil papers and in those in a particular receptive mood toward the type of advertisements which, by some coincidence, the Pan-National Syndicate generously ordered by wire or phone that same night, the headlines were inclined to be slightly more specific:

PAN-NATIONAL SYNDICATE OIL PROPERTIES OVERFLOW IN TIN SPOUT MIRACLE FIELD

INCOMPARABLE BONANZA OF PAN-NATIONAL OIL LEASES REVEALED BY SPECTACULAR OIL FIRE

There were tangles of charred timbers and piles of ashes smoldering beneath the Texas sun next morning;

but in the mind of the American public that morning was a different picture, a picture which created a mental condition whereby the three words, "Tin Spout, Texas," instantly suggested, "Riches in Oil."

In strict accuracy there was more than a condition of material destruction at Tin Spout next morning. The spirit of the American was flaming there as brightly as in more favored settings. Men had taken the fire in various ways when it struck, but there had been no impotent wailing against fate, no sunken head was bowed in defeated hands, no fists futilely shaken at heaven on high.

The garage was an early victim of the exploding gasoline tank, but fortunately one of the cars was outside beyond reach of the flames, and even while the walls of his shop were falling in the proprietor was occupied in assuring himself that the saved car had a full supply of fuel. His foresight was based upon an appreciation of his fellow townsmen's spirit. Chili Joe lost a hotel and eating house, and while the walls were falling in Joe was bargaining with the owner of a truck for a flying trip after a tent and cots and supplies.

"I was figuring on enlarging, anyway," said the owner of the grocery store as he watched it go up in flames. "Lafe, save me a seat in your car, because I want to go get me a new stock."

"Let's go!" said Lafe.

While the buildings were still burning brightly his car bore a load of ruined men to the nearest point where food and building material and other emergency supplies could be secured. When daylight appeared and revealed the trucks arriving, laden with carpenters and lumber and

supplies, sleepless citizens were waiting impatiently for the ashes to cool so they could begin to rebuild, and Chili Joe had an oil stove burning in the oven and was dispensing coffee and sandwiches at one dollar the order.

CHAPTER XXIII

MARJORIE'S dramatic outburst in Tarrant's defence had come without premeditation or intent. It was one of those spontaneous assertions of instinct which, having occurred, leave one startled and amazed; and this was the mood in which she found herself while driving away from the holocaust of Tin Spout. The fire seemed to her the inevitable product of the atmosphere of rivalry, of greed and ruthlessness which prevailed about her. As the fulminations of an electrically charged thunder-sky result in the explosion of lightning and the crash of thunder so the conflict of emotions which seethed about her seemed logical to produce a climax like the fire. Her tortured emotions—the virginal emotions of girlhood cruelly subjected to violent impressions—had wrought her up to a pitch in which her constant sensation was that something must burst. By day she watched apprehensively for warning of the cataclysm, studying her father and Bodine, and listening eagerly to their most casual words. At night she tossed sleeplessly, oppressed by the sense of an unseen menace. The heat at Tin Spout now was approaching its summer vehemence. The shoddily built frame hotel was like an oven, and the heat at night in the small room rendered even a light nightgown oppressive. The babble about the place and in the street outside never ceased before early morning, and Marjorie closing door and window and turning out the light in an effort to achieve rest, would lie stretched out upon her bed, a tense, slender figure with wide-awake eyes.

The outbreak of the fire at Tarrant's well had come as the solution of a problem. In a flash she understood: this was how the Syndicate planned to clear the field! She had cowered in her darkened room until the swiftly spreading fire had reached the hotel. Then had come the necessity of rescuing the half-crazed Mrs. Wayne, and after that came her spontaneous declaration upon the stairs.

Now the great moment was over. She sank back in the service car that bore her and the Wayne's toward Ranger Falls in a dazed and wondering frame of mind. Automatically she petted and assured the hysterical woman at her side, but her consciousness was far afield. What had she done? Why had she done it? What would be the consequence?

Her memory flashed back to the burning hotel and she lived the moment over again. She was again upon the stairway, the flaming derrick at her back. And for the moment she was quite unconscious of her lack of apparel —but for the moment only. Now Bodine's eyes were upon her. The red flames reflecting upon them; his eyes were red, red and burning and hungry. They stripped her. They seemed to devour her nude body. She threw herself back convulsively in the seat.

"Oh, my God!" she murmured.

"Don't weaken, kid," adjured the driver with gruff sympathy. "I'll have you with your father in no time. Then you'll be O. K."

"Yes," said Marjorie, and she controlled an impulse to laugh wildly.

Dr. Dickinson had remained in Ranger Falls that night in order not to miss any time from the Oil Exchange, and

by the time Marjorie and the Waynes arrived he had received over the telephone the story of the fateful evening at Tin Spout, including Marjorie's outburst in Tarrant's defence. As a consequence his gratitude at beholding her safe and unharmed was qualified with a degree of nervous reproach.

"I don't understand you, Marjorie," he protested. "I try to do my best for you and you seem inclined to run contrary to my interests—your own interests, I mean. After that ruffian's offensive conduct toward you I should think you would be the last person in the world to defend him. He is a trouble maker; he's always making trouble. He is responsible for that fire——"

"Father!"

"He is!" he affirmed. "If he hadn't been the ruffianly troublemaker that he is there would have been no fire. I thought I could trust you or I would never have taken you into my confidence, Marjorie, I'm terribly disappointed in you." He turned upon her doggedly, "Why did you defend this ruffian? What will Mr. Bodine think? Great Heavens, Marjorie! Bodine is about to make Tin Spout a boom town and my fortune—our fortune—is made, if he favours me. In a few weeks that brute Tarrant will be gone and forgotten and Mr. Bodine will be the biggest man here. Think of the man's brilliance, to convert this catastrophe into a blessing! Think of the boon he confers on Tin Spout! There's nobody like him, Marjorie, nobody like Bodine. You will see that clearly in time."

"I don't want to go back there," burst forth Marjorie irrelevantly.

"To Tin Spout?" Dr. Dickinson debated a moment,

then nodded agreeably. "Quite right, Marjorie. It won't be the sort of a place I'd like my little girl to be in just at present. We will stay here until Mr. Bodine comes with word that the field is clear."

Marjorie was grateful that he did not insist upon a reply to his question of why she had cried out in Tarrant's defence, as she would have been at loss to answer. Why had she done it? She was incessantly asking herself the question now that she could consider her action in retrospect. The deed had been wrung from her; her words were as spontaneous as any cry of instinct. Did she really care so much for fair play that she was hurt at the thought of Tarrant's enterprise being crushed by the Syndicate? Nonsense! She did not give two pins for any business, or business methods. She didn't care for anything, she thought. Life was too brutal. Before her eyes rose a picture of the holocaust, and from the billowing flames Bodine's eyes shone upon her with the look in them that made her shrink and feel helpless and afraid. The spirit which had emboldened her for a moment on the burning stairs was gone. She felt that she was groping in a world of darkness, and she felt hands reaching out toward her; but none of them offered Love.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE Tin Spout boom truly began with the arrival of the first newspapers, for only then, as they noted the black headlines and perused the descriptions of the fire did the citizens truly envisage the potential position of the town they were about to rebuild. As a consequence the building plans which they had formulated so swiftly were promptly discarded or enlarged upon. The boom was in swing within the hour after the newspapers were in hand, its primary manifestation being represented by the activity of real-estate speculators seeking to corner building lots on Main Street. But there were few sellers now, even though the lots were heaped with smoking timbers and ashes. Men might be ruined, they might be ragged and hungry, but they refused rich offers for their lots with scorn.

The Tin Spout that rose from the scarcely cooled ashes was an effort to approximate the position which had been created for it. A new wonder town of oildom, an oil metropolis in a miracle field, could scarcely live up to its rôle if it contented itself with a few hastily built shacks. A concrete block-moulding machine was on the way to the site of the hotel before the ruins had been removed, and a hostelry adequate to the demands of the new day, and being constructed of concrete blocks it called itself fireproof, rose as an example for builders to follow. Above the box-car station rose a vast sign of muslin bearing the words:

ROME WAS NOT BUILT IN A DAY—TIN SPOUT WAS!

Having thus administered its rebuke to older and slower civilisations, Tin Spout was ready for business.

Business arrived in vehicles of all kinds in addition to the trains. Many of the arrivals were from near-by fields, but in the rush which now developed there were few states and no large cities which were not represented. Similarly there were few classes or divisions of our population which failed of representation. Eastern financiers rode in on the same train as Western gamblers, and Western capitalists with Eastern thugs. Those modern American pioneers, Nick Sainopopulus, restaurant keeper, and A. Nathan, gents' clothing, were soon among those present. A Salvation Army trio held successful meetings every night, and Arkansaw, the gambler, came up from Ranger Falls and opened a "room." He, also, met with success.

A young genius erected a wire corral, filled it with army tents and cots, and put up a sign: "Hotel." In its time this hotel housed, if the term is permissible, writers seeking material, roughnecks seeking employment and promoters seeking graft. Capitalists with millions at their call and sneak thieves at their work slept on those cots. It was not a safe place. Experienced men placed their money and valuables out of sight and reach upon retiring and slept on their shoes if they were so finicky as to remove them. Less experienced men were apt to wake in the morning to cry out to a contemptuous audience that they had been robbed.

A hundred service cars took up their stand at Tin Spout, and 50 per cent of their drivers were bootleggers; and a dozen "high-jackers" lived off them, holding them up

on lone roads and robbing the drivers and passengers. And everybody seemed to have money and to be on the way to making more. Failure was unknown. Naturally many failures must have occurred, but they were not known. The smothering Texas summer air was surcharged to the drugging point with the potent intoxicant—"Boom." The mood of optimism mounted to the verge of insanity. Men were drunk upon it. There was no other mood to be found.

"She's another boom town," said Elmer, "and boom towns are hell and corruption naturally, but, by heaven, they are alive!"

Tarrant's bewilderment at Marjorie's outburst in his defence was too complete for him to attempt to realise the significance of her act. The scene had burned itself into his mind to remain for life a vivid memory. It was like a dream to him, at times, terrible in its drama and beauty. He saw her again and again as a spirit which rose above the sordidness of the oil town, and was untouched by its madness or its destruction. He could appreciate her thus. It was when he came down to earth and attempted to comprehend her action and words that he was all at sea. Yet he was too hard-headed not to appreciate that these were of greatest importance to him in his present situation. Bodine had obviously been alarmed when the girl cried out:

"Shall I tell what I know?"

What did she know? What secret did she possess that made Bodine spring so suddenly to the fore and take action to prevent her from saying more? Was she on such close terms that the promoter had taken her into his

confidence to the extent of confiding to her dangerous secrets? If so, why should she come to the defence of him, Bodine's rival and competitor? Tarrant gave it up. The call of his duties was too insistent to permit him to waste any time or thought upon his personal affairs, however vital they might be to himself.

Bodine's promptness in envisioning and seizing opportunity in the midst of the fire and turmoil of that terrible night had opened Tarrant's eyes to the calibre of the man he was fighting. Unless he was to be swallowed up in the tidal wave of the boom which the Syndicate was engineering and controlling he must key himself up to greater endeavors. By all means he must keep his producing wells in operation. The monthly checks from the pipe-line company now had become the lifeblood of his enterprise.

Normally he had been able to attract sufficient local capital to further his developments. Now the Syndicate was absorbing all such capital. For so long as the boom lasted Bodine and his associates would largely control the money market. Tarrant knew he would be an outsider. By maintaining the settled production of his well he would be able to continue drilling the wildcat. If he struck oil in the deep sand which his faith told him lay somewhere in the earth, all might be well. If he brought in a duster—but Tarrant was of too sanguine a disposition to admit that any disaster could spell complete defeat.

Taking his clew from the night raids on his properties, he at once added more men to his pay roll whose appearance caused the knowing ones of the oil field no little perturbation. Some of them came from near-by fields, some from far away; some had worn officer's stars and some had been pursued by officers. There were plenty

of them to be found, men who would rather fight than work, and who sold themselves and their loyalty as a matter of course. Had circumstances placed them upon the Syndicate pay roll they would have opposed Tarrant with the same unreasoning grimness with which they now guarded his properties. They guarded the storage tanks, the pumping station, the jacks and the new test well. On their time off they went into Tin Spout and added their bit to the note of tension and disorder which day by day was rising there, and in the camp where they were quartered they fought among themselves as a matter of course.

Tarrant had thrown himself into the fight so completely that he had few thoughts for anything else. The very viciousness of the situation absorbed him as it did everyone else who came in contact with it. He saw himself, his men, the opposition and every man in the field caught in a maelstrom of madness brewed by the wealth inherent in the evil-smelling liquid gold. After would come peace and sanity, but while the whirlpool was raging men succumbed to the greed and the fighting qualities which the opportunity for sudden wealth invariably brings forth.

He seldom trusted himself to think of Marjorie. The vision of her on the stairs the mad night of the fire had enshrined her in his memory. He had placed her upon a pedestal. He felt the struggle into which he had plunged himself had sullied him to an extent that made vain his old hopes toward her. The mad moment in which he had clasped her to his breast and the scene at the Country Club were the pictures that rose in his mind when he thought of her. The pictures burned. So she must see

him—how otherwise? Brutal, ruthless, quarrelsome. Youthlike he reveled in his self-condemnation. The fact that she had defended him in the face of the mob lost the significance that it might have had. The oil game was mastering him, and he did his best to forget the hopes and aspirations which she had awakened. He did not see her again for some time.

It was Wayne who was responsible for their next meeting. He came to Tarrant's shack one night long after midnight and knocked at the door. Tarrant arose and turned on the light, and after one look at his visitor's face invited him in. Wayne was sober. His face was white and drawn and his body seemed shrunken, but his eyes were calm and clear of blood, and his manner was quiet, even subdued. He sat on the edge of a chair and looked at the floor.

"Spence, can you lend me five hundred dollars?" he began. "I've got to send my wife north for the hot weather. She had a sort of breakdown after the fire, and it would be too tough to ask her to stay here in the summer. Her folks live up in Michigan. If I can get her up there," he concluded, "she'll be all right—she'll be all right."

Tarrant was too astonished to speak for some time. "You know it, boy," he said finally. "You can have anything I have got if you need it."

"I know it, Spence," responded Wayne in his subdued monotone. "I knew you would help a fellow in spite of—of things; and that's why I came to you."

Again there was a silence.

"I suppose you are wondering how come I need to bor-

row five hundred dollars, aren't you, Spence?" said Wayne.

"We all get short at times," replied Tarrant evasively. "I've been down to where I had to make a touch for a ten spot."

Wayne wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"I'm flat," he said hopelessly. "I'm cleaned out of every dollar I had, and I have borrowed ten thousand from the bank that I can't repay. I wasn't satisfied to wait. The game got me. Bodine said Pan-National was sure to jump after the fire. I put up every dollar I could scrape together on margins trying to run a corner. Somebody dumped a block of shares on the market and the stock dropped until I was wiped out. Wiped out clean. It was my fault. I must have been crazy. The damn oil turned my head. It got me. It gets everybody that touches it.

"It has got Dickinson. He has put every cent of his money into oil shares and they are boarding at the Deaf Hemps because it's cheap, so Dickinson can have more money to play the Exchange. I want to get my wife out of it as soon as I can—on the morning train. Can you let me have that to-night, Spence? Arkansaw will cash your check."

He took the check which Tarrant wrote, and shook hands. His fingers clung nervously in the grip as if reluctant to let go, and it was apparent that he was striving to express himself; but the words would not come, and with a final grip of the hand he turned and went out into the night.

The remainder of Wayne's story came to Tarrant from the lips of Arkansaw, the gambler, who sought him out at daybreak two mornings later:

"He came to me with your check and asked if I would cash it so he could send his wife north on the morning train," said the gambler, "and I see he was cold sober and I said, sure, if he was promising that was what he was going to use it for. He looked right smart, best I've seen him looking all spring. He shook hands and says, 'Arkansaw, you're a good fellow,' and I thought that was right odd at the time but I done forgot it. Sure 'nough he did send his wife north next morning, and they tell me they looked right happy, both of them.

"Soon as he see the train was heading for the Red River what does he do but go and hang up his diamond pin for a hundred dollars. And he hits for the Country Club. He cuts loose considerable, but they tell me his liquor don't touch him. Last night about one o'clock a newspaper man out there asks him if he knows any news and Wayne says he sure does and they'll hear about the gusher he's going to bring in before the morning. The last anyone sees him alive he's walking out to get the air, he says, and pretty soon they hear the shot and when they get to him Wayne has cashed in."

CHAPTER XXV

OF the many varied types that had come to Tin Spout with the rush that followed upon the fire, none arrived with a stranger history or for a more fantastic purpose than the old couple known as the Deaf Hemps. Perhaps among the many stories of unhappiness which the boom gave birth to more could be found with deeper pathos than theirs.

The Deaf Hemps were man and wife, both in the sixties. The nickname which they bore was deceptive. Neither suffered from the slightest difficulty in hearing. In the long, barren years when the two were making a complete failure of farming and stock raising on their ranch outside of Ranger Falls, their debts had accumulated until they owed something to practically everyone in that region. Creditors shouted at them as they drove along the road. Creditors besieged them at the ranch and upon their rare visits to town. Then it was that the Hemps simultaneously developed deafness to an extent which caused the creditors' objurgations to go unheeded. Year after year the Hemps starved on their hopeless acres, their lives slowly withering away toward a painful end—and then the oilmen came.

Now it was no case of deafness that made the old Hemps pathetic. Their trouble was that they were millionaires.

The barren ranch land upon which cattle had starved and crops withered away had hidden one of the richest

pools in the Ranger Falls field. A forest of derricks sprouted upon it. Gushers were brought in that yielded a small fortune each week, and one-eighth of the golden flood went to the owners of the land. Without stirring a finger beyond signing leases and receipts for bonus money the old couple had come into an income of a quarter million a year, and as a consequence they were woefully, pitifully unhappy.

The flood of wealth had come too late. Their day for appreciating what money may bring was past. They could not even enjoy the leisure which had been thrust upon them. Moving into Ranger Falls they had sat with idle, gnarled hands, knowing not what to do. The Tin Spout boom and the consequent demand for rooms and meals had been a greater godsend to them than their wealth. The Hemps rented a house at Tin Spout and took in boarders.

"Folks say we're foolish for doing this," said Mrs. Hemp, "but I dunno; as I say to pa, you never can tell what's going to happen and I certainly do believe in putting something by for a rainy day while you got the chance."

Marjorie and her father were boarding at the Hemps', and it was there Tarrant went to see her. The recent tragedy seemed to have given him a clearer vision of the terrible power of the game he was playing. In a few short weeks he had seen it alter Wayne from a young, cheerful operator, with life and optimism running fresh in his veins, to a hopeless wreck who saw only one way out of the morass into which the game had plunged him. He had seen his own friends become his enemies. Dickinson he had seen maddened by the lure of wealth which

Bodine dangled before his eyes. And the game was growing wilder, more intense, more fatal.

He had chosen his time well and came upon Marjorie as she sat reading in the Hemps' parlor. There was no greeting between them. She saw he had come with a definite purpose and looked up waiting for him to explain. As he looked at her he was glad he had come, and the purport of his errand broke from him in a steady torrent of words.

"You will say I am presumptuous, Miss Dickinson," said he. "That doesn't matter. You should not remain in Tin Spout. It is no place for you. Go home. You don't belong here. It's going to get wild and rough. You don't know what an oil town can be. There's something in an oil boom that makes men mad. I suppose it's the gold that is in it. Men scramble for that gold; they fight and steal, and go after it regardless. A few get it—it's always that way—and the rest of the crowd hangs round them like a flock of hungry wolves round a bunch of fat cattle. Men and women. They can't make money, so they come to take it away from those who can.

"They are not smooth or gentle parasites, either. Look at the faces of the men who come pouring into town on every train. Yes, and the women, too. Do you find over half of them decent or civilised? The other half is here on the loot. They're not bred right to do anything but what they do. They are here to get their share of the gold that is in the oil, and they don't care how they go about it. They will set the tone of the town for the short time that the boom fever is on. They will affect everyone in the place. It is always so in a new oil field. The real fellows grow rougher, reckless, tough. The wild spirit

in the air gets away with them. There will be a perfect devil's standard here from now on, and you—you are too fine to be near it."

"I don't understand," she said. "Won't you explain more definitely?"

Tarrant hesitated.

"Well," he said finally, "you saw the Country Club that Saturday night."

A flush which she fought to control flushed her cheeks, but looking steadily at him she said: "Yes?"

"The Country Club on Saturday night is a sample of the conditions that will determine the standard of Tin Spout during the time it is having its spell of boom fever," he went on. "There is one Country Club in business now; in a month there will be half a dozen of them right in this field. There is law and order here now, but when the boom fever is on all that will all disappear. It gets them all.

"The county attorney and the newest deputy sheriff will be affected the same. A robbery looks bad now; but they won't think anything of it then. There will be all sorts of scrapes. The stakes will be so big men won't care how the game is played. Murder will be an incident. I mean that literally. It won't last long; and when it is over the toughs will go on their way and the regular fellows will come back to their senses again. But while it lasts it will be plumb hell, Miss Dickinson, and you have no business in it."

She heard him through patiently, as if she knew that what he said was true, and that the knowledge did not alter an irrevocable situation.

"You talk as if I were entirely helpless," she said at length.

"I didn't mean to," he replied. "I merely want to give you good advice."

"Well—you have done so."

"And I want to see you take it."

"Oh! That's quite a different matter, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes; that is entirely up to you," he agreed. "I can't make you take the advice. I wish I could—I wish I had the right."

He broke off as he noted the blood mounting to her cheeks.

"Take it that we aren't even friends," he said. "Consider me as anything you please; nevertheless you must admit that I know just what this field will be when the boom is going good. You believe that, don't you? Then accept my word that it will be no place for you."

"On the contrary," she said, with a sudden display of excitement, "I believe it will be the very place for me."

"What!"

"There will be fortunes made and lost here," she said. "Perhaps my fortune will be made or lost. All—all I have—is involved in this oil game. Do you imagine I came down to this desolate spot for pleasure? What do you suppose sent me here? Made it possible for me to be—to be exposed to—to——"

"Don't say it!" groaned Tarrant. "Don't I know what a hound I was?"

She paused, looking down at the ground, her breath coming and going quickly. Presently she lifted her face and looked directly in his eyes.

"It was because my father had been caught by the game," she said. "Nothing else! He has played desperately. I know it, I know exactly how things stand. And—I know how I can save him and myself from complete ruin. But there is a chance—a fair chance—that——"

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

"What do you fancy I mean?" she demanded.

Tarrant looked at her a long time. Her youthful beauty to him seemed like a rare flower, a bloom which he would have cheerfully given his life to protect, to guard and cherish. The desire to clasp her virginal form in his arms, to hold her tight and never let her go, welled up in him. But he had yielded to that impulse once, yielded wildly, unreasonably; and because she was what she was he felt that mad moment had forever destroyed his right to utter the words of love that rose to his lips. And yet he did utter them, for the urge within him was too strong to control, and the words came rolling out hoarsely.

"I don't care what you mean," he said. "I love you, I will always love you. Can't you——"

"Mr. Tarrant!" her body was trembling, but her eyes were firm. They caught his eyes, held them, accusing him with her memory of his past action.

"All right," he said. "Forgive me. Forget I spoke."

"What did you think I meant?" she insisted.

"Nothing," said Tarrant.

In truth her meaning was obvious. If the Syndicate's plans were fulfilled the boom would make Bodine a multi-millionaire, and she would marry Bodine.

"Nothing," he replied and turned away.

So it happened that he did not see the look in her eyes as she watched him go.

Meanwhile Tarrant's wildcat test well had become the talk of the field. The Syndicate had effectually stopped production for business reasons. Human nature being so constituted that man will fly to invest in a gilded promise where he will scorn a small but sure thing, it behooved Bodine and his associates, during their stock-selling campaign, to see that no wells were completed in or about the spot now magically known as Tin Spout. The old shallow production of Tin Spout was well known. Its possibilities had been demonstrated. Investment in the small, proved wells that had made the field offered a comparatively certain but low return. Wherefore drilling wells was beneath the syndicate's contempt.

The Syndicate was marketing a golden promise. Its sales agents, scattered over the country, were interesting bankers, shop girls, milliners and farmers in what the Tin Spout field might do, not what it had done. If news went forth that a small well or a dry hole had been completed the sheen of the golden lure would be dimmed. More fatal, however, to the machinations of the Syndicate would be the discovery of a true oil field outside its holdings. The public interest and the flow of checks would switch to the new field.

Tarrant's refused to heed the appeal of his stockholders and turn the property over to the Syndicate had further heightened the interest in the well. The holders of stock had begun to suspect something. Why should Tarrant want to keep the wildcat as an independent property? Why did he keep on drilling?

The well soon became known as the Mystery Well, and

the inevitable crop of rumours began to breed, spread and multiply. Stockholders who sought to investigate these rumours on the ground were accorded the same summary treatment as suspected spies of the Syndicate. Tarrant had chosen the shotgun guards of the well for their hardness and had given them carte blanche.

"Get to blazes out of here and you won't get hurt."

This, with occasionally a prod from a gun, was the reception accorded one and all at the wildcat lease. An innocent rancher, losing his way in the dark, had the tires shot off his flivver before he had time to explain. Inevitably the rumours increased. Tarrant had got a showing of oil sand. He had shut off one pay sand. It was a better sand than any in the Tin Spout field. He had shut it off and continued drilling because he had a showing of something big. As days passed the rumours became more definite. Someone claimed to have seen the log. The formation was identical with Ranger Falls Discovery No. 1 well, the great gusher that had made millions and opened up that great field.

None of these rumours had the slightest basis, for no one outside of Tarrant and Buck and Elmer had seen the log of the well, and none of these had spoken its secrets. But the effect was the same.

"Tarrant has got something," was the verdict. "He is playing fox."

On the oil exchange there was a rush to buy Tarrant Wildcat No. 5. The offers ran up to five times the original cost of the stock; and there was not a share offered for sale.

And the price of oil continued to rise. High-gravity crude of the test produced in the Tin Spout field went to

two dollars and a quarter. On the day that Buck, glancing at the contents of the bailer as he poured it in the slush pool, swiftly called out that the drilling was over, oil was two dollars and a half a barrel.

Tarrant reached the well late in the afternoon, and at the sight of the tools hanging suspended above the casing he knew at once that the answer to his quest of faith was at hand.

"What say, Buck?" he asked casually.

Buck nodded.

"You said to shut down and send for you if——"

"Yes," said Tarrant. He looked round. "How about the men?"

"I sent them to the cook shack the minute I saw what it was," said Buck.

"That's right. How deep are you?"

"Eighteen ninety-three," was the reply.

"I figured we would hit it this side of two thousand if at all," said Tarrant. "You ran the bailer?"

"Only once. I stopped as soon as I saw a sign." Buck pointed to the slush pool. "There's the sign."

Tarrant cast a swift, expert glance at the top slush which represented the latest bailing from the well and nodded.

"Run her again, Buck," said he.

"I done have," was the reply. "She's hanging down there in the casing waiting for you."

"Good! None of the men have seen it?"

"I haven't seen it myself, boss," said Buck.

"All right," said Tarrant quietly. "You join the men in the shack for a little while, Buck."

When he was quite alone Tarrant drew the long tube-

like bailer from the casing and carried it to the slush pool. The sun was shining brightly and its slanting rays shimmered and danced upon the contents of the bailer as he carefully poured it into the pool. Buck, lounging in the door of the cook shack saw Tarrant bend forward and concentrate upon a study of the result. After a while Tarrant straightened up. The sun was full upon his face and Bucks' sharp eyes saw every feature distinctly, but the fact made him none the wiser.

"No, sirree," said Buck to himself, "I'll never play poker with that oilman, not with *my* money."

Tarrant searched leisurely until he found a can of gasoline, and just as leisurely poured its contents over the slush and struck a match. When the fire had destroyed all that was combustible in the pool, he called:

"All right Buck; get a cap. We are going to seal her. We will lay off the men, except the shotgun artists. You can lay yourself off for a few days, too."

He waited until the well was sealed. Then he started for town.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE Oil Exchange at Tin Spout was one of the first buildings erected after the inception of the boom. There was no place to sleep comfortably in Tin Spout at that time; in fact, there were few places to sleep at all, and there were even fewer opportunities for procuring good food; but the Oil Exchange provided ample opportunity to speculate in oil shares, so the dearth of creature comforts was overlooked. Arkansaw, the gambler, deprecated the presence of the Exchange as furnishing an unfair competition to his roulette, faro, stud-poker, craps, and blackjack games.

"Folks is built kind of funny, so they sort of yearn for crazy gambling, and the crazier the merrier," philosophised Arkansaw. "If a man wants a nice mild little speculation he'll buck the wheel, but when he's really set to gamble he'll hit for the Exchange."

The Exchange was a square one-story box of a building which occupied the most prominent corner in town. The interior consisted of a single large room. A blackboard with a raised platform running its length occupied one wall. There were close to 500 oil stocks listed on this board, and if occasion required the clerks would obligingly write in the name of any company that had been recently formed. The new companies thus hurriedly listed averaged a round dozen each day.

The centre of the great floor of the room was covered with benches upon which sat the more patient of the

speculators. These comprised the bulk of the town's population, from the solid merchants to the petty thieves and bootleggers, and from the solid merchant's wife, serious of dress and bearing, to the painted girls who followed the dance halls. Stenographers, clerks and waitresses brought their lunches there and spent the noon hour munching sandwiches and hoping to hear the silk-shirted man on the run-way announce a bid for the particular stock they had put their savings in. The majority of the stocks were worthless. Most of the speculators were aware of this, but they knew also that a few—a very few perhaps—of the hundreds of different shares listed on the board would bring fortunes to their possessors.

Day and night the Exchange was crowded now. Oil was going up. The fever of speculation in oil shares was upon the land. And here, where the speculations were conceived and engineered, the fever raged highest. Tin Spout worked only to procure money to speculate with. To save, to put by the earnings of even a prosperous business, was too slow. The day's work done, men and women swarmed to the Exchange. The evening trade was briskest of all, and the Exchange remained open so long as there was a bid.

When Tarrant arrived in Tin Spout after sealing his well the Oil Exchange was so crowded that a group was gathered about the open door, unable to obtain entry into the room and yet able to watch the board and take part in the trading. Within the room there was the heat and dust and perspiration of a tightly packed, restless crowd. The benches were occupied to the last inch. The space along the walls was jammed with red-faced, khaki-clad operators. Millionaires and potential millionaires were

jostled by roughnecks, Mexicans, Indians, and paid no heed to it. Wives and mothers of impeccable standing unconsciously rubbed shoulders with women whose trade was sin.

All divisions of humanity, of sex, of race, creed, color or morals were swept away. They were inconsequential. Something was going to happen. The tension presaged something big. In the crowd before the blackboard the faculty of reason was temporarily in abeyance. Instinct was dominant, the instinct for gain. No one was conscious of the crowd about him. No one was conscious of himself. Self was forgotten. God was forgotten. Liquid gold was master.

Tarrant lingered a moment with the group at the doorway. His face was hardened with determination. He was broke. The deep test had drained him dry. He was desperate and therefore ruthless.

"Bid two for Tarrant No. 5."

His voice calling out through a lull in the room was like the clang of a gong. A moment of complete silence fell upon the Exchange.

"Two offered for Tarrant No. 5," sang the caller on the platform. "Who is bidding?"

"Bid two for Tarrant No. 5," repeated Tarrant, thrusting himself toward the board. The caller stared. The crowd stood on tiptoe to see. Some recognised the large sombrero and a whisper ran tensely through the room:

'Tarrant is after his own stock!"

"Bid two," said Tarrant to the caller. "What's wrong, bud; lost your voice?"

"Two for Tarrant No. 5!" cried the caller. "Call your

offers, folks, any offers? Why, Mr. Tarrant, there's been ten bid and no offers made."

"Bid ten," said Tarrant presently.

"Up she goes!" chanted the man. "Ten bid. Make your offers."

All other trading ceased. The room gradually became stilled. The fat manager of the Exchange, sensing something big, put a fresh cigar in the corner of his mouth and with a nod of appreciation to Tarrant mounted the platform and took personal charge.

"Ten bid for Tarrant No. 5," he said, leaning impressively on the railing. "Let me have an offer."

"Who has got that stock?" he demanded crisply, walking up and down the platform. "Somebody has got it. Offer it. Any figure. Mr. Tarrant is bidding. See if you can't get together. Any offer?"

"Nothing at ten, Mr. Tarrant," he said suggestively, returning to the bidder. "We've had a standing bid of ten and no offers."

"Bid eleven," said Tarrant.

"Eleven bid for Tarrant No. 5," cried the manager, pounding the railing. "Miss Barker, you had some of that stock."

"Yeah," snapped the waitress whom he addressed, "and I was fish enough to trade it for Pan-National."

"Collins," called the manager, "how about you?"

"Done let mine go, too," was the angry reply.

"Bid twelve," said Tarrant.

"Twelve bid for Tarrant No. 5," said the manager slowly and impressively. "I advise those who possess this stock to make an offer, and see if we can make a deal."

In the silence that followed Tarrant said impatiently:

"Bid fifteen."

"Fifteen!"

The crowd suddenly seethed with excitement. The cauldron boiled over. Men looked about seeking the fortunate owners of the stock. The wife of a banker swore dispassionately as she recalled how long ago she had sold her Tarrant No. 5. There was no question concerning the well now. Tarant had hit it! He was trying to get all the stock back in his own hands before bringing in the well. Men slipped out and ran up and down the street frantically hunting odd shares of the stock. Barbers left unshaven customers in the chair and hurried to the Exchange.

"Spence," whispered Elmer in Tarrant's ear, "Bodine just came in and he's looking wicked."

"Bid twenty," said Tarrant calmly.

"Twenty bid for Tarrant No. 5," tolled the manager. His assistants out of sheer hysteria repeated the call.

"Twenty bid for Tarrant No. 5!"

"Bid twenty-five," called Bodine sharply.

"*Twenty-five* bid for Tarrant No. 5!" cried the callers.

"Buy at thirty." Bodine had emphatically usurped Tarrant's position as the centre of the situation.

"Thirty-two," drawled the latter.

"Thirty-five," said Bodine.

"Forty," said Tarrant.

There was a lull. The callers were too astounded to speak. All eyes, except Tarrant's, were upon Bodine.

"Forty-five!" snapped the promoter.

Tarrant turned on him hotly.

"How many shares have you got?" he demanded. "You can't get control. What are you trying to do?"

"I'll show you what I'm trying to do," retorted Bodine. "Call that bid: forty-five for No. 5."

"It's no use, Bodine," said the young man. "I've got the control. You've cornered the rest of it, but it won't do you any good. I'll give you forty-five for what you have got, but that's the limit."

"Nothing doing!" sneered Bodine.

Tarrant leaned on one leg leisurely and hooked his thumbs on his belt and grinned.

"Whew! That was a close call!" he drawled. "If anyone ever had told me I'd go and make a fool of myself like that I'd sure been peeved. Reckon the oil fever must be getting me, too, seeing as I ain't drinking any."

"You don't fool me by that talk, Tarrant, not a bit," said Bodine.

Tarrant shifted from one foot to the other.

"What do you want of that fool stock, anyway?" he drawled. "You can't get enough to give you control of one string of casing in No. 5. Personally, Bodine, you are not so popular with me. I control the well. I can ruin No. 5, or I can let her lay, or I can shoot her, just as I please. You better turn your stock over to me. I'll take it at forty-five."

Bodine's reply was a smile of cold contempt.

"All right!" Tarrant suddenly threw all the intensity of his personality into the play of his final card. "You know me, Bodine; you know my record. Can you see me bringing in a well that you would cash in on? Can you? No! Not if she never pays me a cent!"

"That's quite satisfactory," said Bodine. "I will be satisfied if you leave it sealed."

"Yes, but that stock is only on Well No. 5!" cried Tar-

rant. "Do you understand, Bodine? It's a big lease and there's plenty of room to drill new holes. Bodine, you're stung. You've dropped your money in a hole that I am going to jam all to blazes!"

He turned to go, the picture of reckless anger incarnate.

"Just a minute, Tarrant," said Bodine. "I am still bidding. Bid fifty for Tarrant No. 5!"

"For how many shares?" cried Tarrant.

"All there are," replied the promoter coolly.

"I've got all there are, Bodine."

"Are you offering?"

"Yes!"

"Bought," said Bodine. "Tarrant, you are going out of this field one way or another. I don't want you round."

Tarrant saved the pleasure of a retort until the transfer had been effected and the hundred thousand dollars which Bodine paid him for his shares was deposited to his account.

"Bodine, I figured you wouldn't stand by and pass up a chance to grab a lease away from me," said he. "You sure are set on getting me out of this field, aren't you?"

"Yes, and if you are wise you will leave right now," retorted Bodine. "You have got a hundred thousand dollars clear. If you persist in asking for a show-down we will send you out of here with nothing but your bare hands."

Tarrant looked at him with cold eyes and smiled.

"A hundred thousand dollars," he repeated. "Why, man, that is just my stake money. Haven't I told you I am after a real oil well round here?"

"And I have made plain to you our position," retorted the promoter. "That is all."

"No it isn't, Bodine," drawled Tarrant. "I forgot to tell you; when you open No. 5 up you needn't trouble to run the bailer. I ran it myself just before I sealed her up. There's dandy sand there. But there is nothing in that sand, Bodine, not even salt water. She's dry! Bodine, I sure am obliged to you for the way you helped me out of a mean hole."

CHAPTER XXVII

BODINE returned at once to his office, where Grogan was waiting. The gunman was getting hard to hold. Ever since the night at the Country Club when Tarrant had so skilfully bluffed him the blood lust had been rising within him. To his feral nature there could be but one way of settlement with Tarrant. The subtleties of Bodine's reactions were impossible to him. Like a drunkard who periodically craves the insanity of his vice, Grogan craved the sensation of feeling a gun in his hand, the roar of a shot and the spectacle of Tarrant's figure crumpling before him.

Bodine's dictation irked him. He cared nothing for a policy that required even temporarily a semblance of meticulous respect for the law. Without a second thought on the matter he would, if alone, have cast the entire future of the Pan-National Syndicate to the winds for the privilege of gratifying his bloody obsession. Bodine was fully aware of this. He knew that eventually Grogan would break the bonds of his influence and plans. He did not purpose, however, to permit such an eventuality to interfere with his ambitions and he held Grogan in sternly.

Grogan was seated in a corner of the office when Bodine entered and closed the door. The gunman's face was a study of frustrated rage. A ring of cigarette stubs littered the floor about his chair, and he was puffing a fresh one. He blew the smoke in slowly through his nose and his eyes stared unseeingly from between narrowed lids. He

made no sign to indicate that he was aware of Bodine's presence, but when the promoter had seated himself at his desk Grogan said softly:

"Don't you interfere next time I go after him."

Bodine did not reply. He took a cigar from the box on the desk, lighted it and presently rose and began to pace the room.

"He's your meat," he said finally, blowing out a great cloud of smoke.

"I don't need you to tell me that," responded Grogan in the same dangerous tone. "He asked for it when he ran that windy on me out at the Club."

"But not yet," continued Bodine after another turn of the room.

Grogan's eyelids drew together a trifle closer.

"I'm pretty tired of hearing that," he purred. "I'm pretty tired of being kept off a four-flusher like Tarrant."

"Are you?" Bodine spoke with a sudden change of tone that caused Grogan to look up. "Then try to down him and see how you make out."

"Meaning he's a hard one?" sneered Grogan. "The big bluffer doesn't go heeled, and he will yelp at the sight of a gun."

"Meaning," said Bodine incisively, "that I don't intend to let any untimely break on your part spoil my plans. I don't want to have to get rid of you, Grogan, unless I have to. If you go on the prod now, I will have to. That is your situation. I am taking no chances. This means too much to me. I want that girl of Dickinson's. I am going to marry her. She doesn't know it yet, but she will soon.

"I am going to break Tarrant. I am going to send him

out of here with no reputation and no money. I'm going to crush him and kick him back to where he belongs—a roughneck with bare hands. I have got the means to do both these things. After they are done you can have him. But not until. Understand me, Grogan? Now go and tell Dickinson to come here at once," commanded Bodine. "Then go back to the Club till I send for you again."

When Marjorie's father entered the office he found Bodine hurriedly writing a number of telegrams. Dickinson waited respectfully. Presently Bodine swung round with the telegrams in his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Vice-President!" said he.

The effect of his words was quite what he had expected it to be; to supplement them he treated his visitor to a subtle wink. A gleam of avidity shone in Dickinson's eyes, and an expression of craftiness came about his lips.

"I have taken the liberty of writing these telegrams before consulting you, Mr. Vice-President," continued Bodine. "I hope they have your endorsement so they may be forwarded at once to the newspapers."

He winked again. Dickinson's hands trembled as he reached for the messages.

"First vice-president!" he stammered. A swift change from pride and gratification to caution and guile swept over his countenance. The pair looked at each other with the crafty expression of fellow conspirators. "But, Bodine, the other directors—stockholders? Can we do—this?"

"Do you want to become a millionaire?" retorted Bodine.

The potent word raised Marjorie's father to his feet in excitement.

"A millionaire!" he repeated.

His eyes followed Bodine's every movement slavishly.

"I want to marry Marjorie," said the promoter. "You know that."

"A millionaire!" repeated the other as if dazed. "Do you mean it, Bodine?"

"I mean it," came the positive answer. "Did you hear what I said about the girl?"

"She'll do it! I'll see that she does. Anything you say," chattered Dickinson. "Yes, yes."

"I can break you, Dickinson," snapped Bodine. "Every dollar you had is in Pan-National stock—and some you didn't have."

"I—I got some loans at the bank," stammered the doctor. "The stock is sure to go up, isn't it?"

"Dickinson," said Bodine, "the day I marry Marjorie all your notes will be paid, and your stock will be secure. The Syndicate is ready to make its big killing. Tarrant will be through here when his option on the 88 Ranch expires. We will be in complete control. Immediately after that we will bring in a big well." He winked. "We have 20,000 barrels of oil in storage here for that purpose. Understand? That well will make you a millionaire, Dickinson. One million? Pooh! There's no limit. Oil is going up, up. The country is crazy about oil. I am going to be one of the real big ones in this game," said Bodine, grinding his teeth savagely, "and I want that girl, Dickinson. I am going to have her." He struck his fist on the desk with the force of a sledge. "One way or another she is going to be mine."

CHAPTER XXVIII

TARRANT experienced no sense of elation at the success of his manœuver. The money he had realised thereby was only a means to an end. Reckless as the drilling of the deep test had appeared it had in reality been only a true part of his search for the great pool. The shallow sand which he had first struck had warned him that the well was too far south. When he had found the deep sand and found that dry also, the secret of the Tin Spout field, the reason why the big pool had not been found was apparent. He at once proceeded to seek a new place to drill.

It was to secure funds for this drilling that he had made his coup on the Exchange. Day after day and night after night he worked toward the future. The geological structure, the fault lines, domes and anticlines of the field were on open book to him. He had been right about the existence of a deep sand. Now his mind followed the dip of that sand deep down into the earth. Somewhere in that sand there was oil. This was an article of faith with him. His task now was to trace the dip of the sand and locate the surface indications of an oil pool far down in the earth.

Day after day he prospected, and his search led him northward, bit by bit. Mile by mile he searched the formation. He reached the Tin Spout field proper. He went through it. It was a week after his sale of Well No. 5 that he came to the end of his quest. The structure he

was seeking lay half a mile within the lines of the section of the 88 Ranch, on which his option expired on the morrow at noon.

He was standing upon a small elevation on the barren section when he arrived at his decision. It was drawing toward the evening of a rainy day. To the westward rumbled the thunder of a dying storm. In the south the lights of Tin Spout were beginning to twinkle, tiny points of cheer in a sodden, desolate scene. Tarrant looked at his watch and knew he had missed the evening train for Ranger Falls. There was, however, plenty of time. He could drive down or take the next train early in the morning.

In the dusk he failed to see the skulking figure which had been watching him from a near-by knoll. The figure slid out of sight as he started for his machine, and ran. Tarrant heard a motor start and race away, but cars were too common thereabouts for it to cause him any worry. As he drove back to town he listened to the rumbling of the storm in the west and decided to wait until the morning train. It would land him in Ranger Falls at 8 o'clock, in plenty of time.

The days and nights of strain had told upon even the young steel of his constitution, and with the end of his search came a sudden weariness. He flung himself fully clad upon the bunk in his office, setting his alarm clock and leaving word with the night pump man to awaken him in time to catch the morning train, and he was sound asleep before the departing engineer had closed the door.

For Marjorie the early part of the evening had been similar to others since she and her father had become

domiciled at the "Deaf" Hemps. At six o'clock Mrs. Hemp had called as usual:

"Is your pop home, Honey?" to be met with the usual response: "Not yet, Mrs. Hemp."

"Then I reckon you'll be stepping down to the Exchange to get him, won't you, Honey?" continued Mrs. Hemp. "And if you see that old man of mine you might get him, too."

Marjorie wearily picked up an umbrella and proceeded upon her regular evening errand. Dr. Dickinson's interest in the speculative business conducted at the Exchange now was of such an absorbing nature that he was reluctant to tear himself away from his chosen seat even for the purpose of nourishment and sleep. Marjorie found their positions reversed. She watched over him and cared for him as one might over an irresponsible child, guarding his welfare in spite of himself. Through long, hot nights she had sat with him when he, haggard and glassy-eyed after a disastrous day, would have resorted to the drugs in his medicine case to secure the sleep which his excited condition denied him. Her own interest had been caught by her father's speculation in oil shares and leases. Constantly he predicted and promised that he would strike a winner. Certainly one of the many leases he dabbled in must yield a gusher; or some of his shares must begin to jump. Then they would be rich and independent as they had been before the doctor had been caught by the oil-game. They would be free. Bodine would lose his power over her father. Thus Marjorie prayed that her father's wild dreams might come true. The dreams seemed to be her only hope at present. Vague and improbable as they were they yet represented hope to her, and in the shadows

beyond them always lurked the figure of Bodine, implacably biding his time.

She did not find her father in the Exchange this evening. She was directed to the office of the Syndicate. Dr. Dickinson was there. So was Grogan and Bodine, the latter with a look of calm triumph upon his countenance as he buttoned a rain-coat about his bulky figure. There was an air of authority, even proprietorship as he greeted Marjorie, for she was young and apparently helpless in the clutch of circumstances, and Bodine at that moment felt himself at the crest of his power.

"You'll be here to-morrow, Marjorie?" said he, taking her hand and beaming upon her.

"Why—yes," she stammered.

"I am going to have something important to say to you to-morrow," said Bodine, softly. "It will be a big day for us—all of us. Au revoir—till to-morrow."

Her father chuckled, rubbing his hands, as they watched Bodine and Grogan drive away in the big car.

"What is it?" she demanded breathlessly. Hope fluttered and rose in her bosom as she studied the elation upon her parent's face. "Father—have you finally—hit it?"

Dr. Dickinson shook his head still chuckling.

"Wait until to-morrow, Marjie," said he. "I can't tell you, but—— No, I can't tell you."

"You can—you can—you must!"

She kept at him mercilessly. What if Bodine had commanded silence. Was she not his daughter, his own flesh and blood?

"Now you tell me, daddy; you tell me at once."

It was not her pleadings so much as Dr. Dickinson's elation that won. The story was too big for the doctor in

his present excited condition to keep secret. It came out in a triumphant chuckle. Bodine was going to Ranger Falls to grab the option on the 88 Lease while Tarrant slept and this move would make the Syndicate absolute master of the field.

"Wait for to-morrow, Marjie," said he, shaking a finger at her playfully. "It will be a big day, especially for my little girl."

She made no reply and he looked at her wistfully.

"You—won't—spoil it, Marjie?" he stammered.

"Daddy!" she whispered. "If I should—if I——"

She looked up swiftly, saw fear, despair, ruin in the haggard face above her.

"Daddy!"

"Ruin!" he whispered, wetting his dry lips. "That's what it means. I'll be ruined. You won't—Marjie—Marjie!"

She went to her room, sick with anguish and apprehension. What would to-morrow bring—for her? Bodine's triumph; her father's triumph; and for her——? Marjorie felt that she was cornered. And then, in her moment of desperation, instinct whispered to her. Bodine was going after the last option that Tarrant held in the field. If he succeeded in getting it Tarrant would be eliminated. He would have to go away. Marjorie started at the shock which the thought dealt her. In the darkness of her room she blushed; she grew warm and cold. Tarrant—they were going to ruin him. They were going to drive him out. He would go away; and then she would be alone, hopelessly, helplessly alone!

She sat up, her lips pressed tight, her whole being vivified and driven by an instinctive power against which she

had no desire to struggle. Could she help him? That was all that mattered. There was no question of loyalty to her father. The force that drove her was too mighty for that. Instinctively she responded to the call. Instinctively she ran forth into the wet night, hugging her new born hope to her panting breast.

Tarrant wakened swiftly from sound slumber. Someone was shaking him, a strange voice was calling his name, and there was a presence in the little office which was new to him.

"Mr. Tarrant, Mr. Tarrant! Wake up, wake up!"

He came to his feet staggering. By the light from the open door he recognised Marjorie and he stared in bewilderment.

"You—you!" he stammered. "What's wrong? What can I do?"

"No, no, no!" she whispered. "I'm all right. It's you. I heard them, Mr. Bodine and Grogan. Grogan had been spying on you. They think you are after the section of 88 ranch."

"I am!" said Tarrant.

"Then—hurry, hurry! They are after it, too!"

Tarrant grew calmer as he heard the words.

"I will telephone Jake Stringer," he said, fumbling in the dark for the telephone. "Then I will try to thank you."

"No, no! Don't waste any time."

"What?"

"The storm has cut us off," she said swiftly. "The wires are down."

"How do you know?" he asked in surprise.

"Because I tried to telephone," she replied promptly.

"To Ranger Falls?"

"To Ranger Falls, yes," she said. And then, with something like a gulp, "I tried to get Mr. Stringer. Tried every way. The wires are down all round Ranger Falls. Telegraph and everything. The town is cut off."

"You tried"—Tarrant could scarcely comprehend. "*You* tried to get Jake Stringer?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I thought you were still out in the field and couldn't be found. There was no time to lose. Then the pump man said you were here. You must not waste any time. They are getting the big machine ready—Mr. Bodine and Grogan. They are going to Ranger Falls to-night!"

In the moment of stress Tarrant grew perfectly calm.

"Bodine and Grogan—going to Ranger Falls to-night," he repeated. "That means they are going to see Jake Stringer. It means they are after the lease on 88 ranch."

"Yes," she said eagerly. "What are you going to do?"

"I can't let them do that," continued Tarrant as before. "I can't let them get 88. I need it in my business."

"Then you must not let them get it."

"That's right. I must not let them get it. I—won't let them get it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Thank you first——"

"Nonsense!"

"Then I will get busy."

"Do it! Do it—at once—please!" she gasped. "Can—can I help any?"

"Any more, do you mean?" he asked. "Don't you know I owe you more now——"

"Don't, please!" she cried. "You must not—waste any time."

"Right!" He began to move. "Will you take a note for Elmer? He's round some place."

"I will find him," she responded. "Write the note."

He switched on the light and wrote hurriedly. As she took the note from his hands he said seriously: "I want to shake hands with you."

"What? Why—why?"

"Because I've got the chance," he said. "Shake."

She looked at the proffered hand and hesitated. Then abruptly she turned and sped away in the gathering darkness.

She found herself alone in the dark with the note for Elmer clutched in her hand. Her whole being was a tumult of emotions. Since the day long ago when Tarrant, in a moment of reckless abandon, had swung her up to his saddle and kissed her with all the intensity of his being, the presence of the young man was disturbing to her. The memory of that moment rose flame clear to her each time she saw him. It disturbed her. She realised that for that moment—the only moment in her life thus far—a man had completely dominated her.

She had fought Tarrant instinctively, the primitive fight of the female against the rude clasp of the male, but she had realised afterward that the moment had left an impression on her otherwise than the primary impression of revulsion. The memory of his steel-like arm about her waist, and the rise and fall of his chest against hers as he had held her ruthlessly to him, was burned in her soul. It had marked the awakening to a consciousness of the physical woman in her. She resented that deeply. Her

life was her own. She had asked nothing from him, and desired no interference to her life program from him.

Being willing to let him alone she had asked, and expected, that he would let her alone. It had not worked out that way. He had brutally forced his way through the hedges of convention into the sanctum of her spirit and ruthlessly driven her to admission of the old, eternal verities. She was a woman, and—he was a man. He had kissed her by force and then he had spoken of love. Never, never could she forget! Never would she forgive! She stamped her feet angrily on the soggy ground. The anger was directed at herself. Why had she come there to-night? Why had she allowed herself to become interested?

The note in her hand crackled as she clenched her fists vehemently. Elmer—she was to find Elmer. The calm impertinence of Tarrant! To use her as his messenger! Where would Elmer be—Tarrant must take her for a fool!—possibly the pump man would know.

"Elmer," repeated the engineer, "why, no, miss, I can't say I do know where you might find that old specimen. He's laying off, you know, and him being the kind of a character he is, there's no telling where he spends his nights. Down to Arkansaw's, most likely."

"The gambler's?"

"Sure, miss. That's Elmer's hangout. The old wreck has had a run of luck lately. Beat me out of——"

She waited to hear no more. That was quite in accord with Tarrant's impertinence—asking her to find a man who frequented gambling houses. Had he not humiliated her sufficiently? She nearly sobbed as she hurried toward

Main Street; but she turned her steps in the direction of the hotel where Arkansaw had his "room."

In the light of the hotel she halted and told herself that this was too much. Then she called a boy, gave him a message and seated herself resolutely in the unkempt lobby. The boy departed respectfully and returned.

"He ain't there, miss," he reported. "Arkansaw says to ask who was askin' for him and did Spence Tarrant want him?"

She debated a moment.

"Go and ask Mr. Arkansaw to come here, please," she said resolutely.

"*Mr.* Arkansas, *Mr.* Arkansaw!" grinned the boy as he obeyed. "That's class, that is."

Arkansaw came, quiet, neatly dressed, respectful. He had lived, had this wicked young man, and nothing could astonish him. He removed his hat.

"It is about Elmer, Mr. Tarrant's foreman," explained Marjorie. "I have a very important message for him."

"From Spence—from Mr. Tarrant?" asked the gambler cautiously.

"Yes, from Mr. Tarrant."

"Elmer hasn't been here to-night," said Arkansaw.

"Do you know where he is? Is he in town?"

The young man shook his head.

"No, I don't reckon he is," he replied. "They're shut down, you know, and Spence has sort of given the crew a vacation. I did see Elmer this morning. He was starting some place in the old flivver."

"Do you know where?"

"I did hear," replied Arkansaw deprecatingly. "He was hitting for the Country Club."

Marjorie hesitated a moment.

"That young man—Mr. Tarrant's driller?"

"You mean Buck?"

"Is that his name? Do you know where he is?"

"Buck," said Arkansaw, "was with Elmer. I reckon there won't be any reaching those boys to-night, miss. The club's across the river, and if that cloud-burst left a bridge standing across the Canyada I'll turn the box—I mean, I don't want a cent."

"Thank you, Mr. Arkansaw," said Marjorie. "I hope I wasn't too much trouble to you."

"Trouble?" drawled Arkansaw, while his sharp eyes studied her. "Say, miss, I am a friend of Tarrant's too. I'm a gambler, but I sure 'nough am one of Spence Tarrant's friends."

"Mr. Tarrant gave me this note to give to Elmer," said Marjorie. "His affairs are in a terrible crisis and I know this is important, and in a hurry."

"You couldn't give me a hint what it's about?" suggested the young man.

"I haven't read it, of course," said she smiling.

"Of course," agreed Arkansaw.

There was a moment of silence. Then with a sudden decision Marjorie opened the note and read:

DEAR ELMER: Get a crew together and haul the boiler and timbers and tools for the rotary rig onto the 88 Lease to night. Round up a bunch of the hard ones and put them on guard. When you're there stick, regardless, till you hear from me.

TARRANT.

Without a moment of hesitation she passed the note to Arkansaw. He read it and kept it.

"Spence ain't round himself?" he asked.

"No," she said; "he has gone to Ranger Falls."

"Ranger Falls?" repeated Arkansaw skeptically. "Sure 'nough? He said he was?"

"Yes. He said he was."

"Well," drawled the gambler, "if Spence said he was going to the Falls I reckon that's where he's going. Well, that being the case, miss, you'd better let me handle this."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Are you——?"

"Well, somebody sure has got to do it for Spence, ain't they?" he drawled.

"But can you?"

"I reckon Spence has got other friends besides me," was the quiet response. "Sure has. Friends that would go to hell for him. I beg your pardon."

To cover an unwonted attack of confusion the young man turned to the boy who waited near.

"Red, you run up and tell Tex to run things for awhile," he directed. "And ask Old Man Swanson to cash in and come down. You excuse me now, miss; I'll chase down to Sore Eye's stable and make him round up his bunch of skinners."

Marjorie went home, but she did not sleep until far toward morning. It was not until, peering from her window, she saw and heard a train of eight-horse trucks, groaning along under the persuasion of profane skinners, that she even thought of retiring. The trucks bore a boiler, timbers and tools, and they were moving north, toward the lease known as "88."

"Somebody must have warned him!" groaned Dr. Dickinson when he became informed of the significance of this nocturnal caravan. "What will Mr. Bodine say?"

"Is that all that matters?" asked Marjorie wearily.

"But Tarrant won't last any longer no matter what he does," continued her parent, unheeding of her question. "The town-people will run him out of the field. They may lynch him. They ought to, the swindler!"

"What are you talking about, father?" demanded the girl.

"About Tarrant selling Mr. Bodine his No. 5 as a producing well!" cried her father. "That's what I'm talking about. And all the time Tarrant knew it was dry!"

"Father," she stammered, "are you sure that is true?"

"Ask anybody!" he flared. "It is known all over town!"

CHAPTER XXIX

TARRANT sat in his roadster at the gasoline-filling station, ready to start the moment the garage man screwed the cap on his fuel tank. Bodine's car had gone. The mark of its huge tires was still deep in the mud of the street. Tarrant considered the speed of his small car as compared to that of the promoter's and he knew the advantage was too heavily with the latter. Bodine would beat him to Ranger Falls unless—Tarrant half rose in his seat. Even as he had reached to throw the clutch in the racing engine his alert senses had caught a message which had not yet become plain to others. With his hand on the lever he sat listening.

Night had come, suddenly and completely. A hollow whispering of wind whipped through the darkness, more like an omen than a wind. It began to rain. A few sporadic dashes of rain whirled over and then it was quiet for a spell. Tarrant's heart leaped and a grim growl issued from his clenched teeth as he sprang to the ground. Staggering under a sudden gust of wind he turned his face to the west. Many miles separated Tin Spout from the furious norther which had rolled like an elemental avalanche down from the Rocky Mountains onto the country lying toward Ranger Falls, but the tale of it was to be read from the fringes of the storm. Tarrant knew from experience what such storms did to the river.

"I'm slowing up," he mused. "A norther like that, and

thinking of getting to Ranger Falls with a car, and the Rio Canyada to cross!"

He ran to Nine Spot's stable, saddled the pony and rode out of town at a walk. He did not follow far the road out upon which Bodine and Grogan had driven. The road was a ditch of liquid mud now, through which any car of less power than Bodine's monster would have hard work moving. Having satisfied himself of this Tarrant pulled Nine Spot off the road and pointed straight across the open country.

To one knowing the lay of the land and not knowing Tarrant's thoughts this must have seemed as the worst of folly, for the road which he quitted ran straight to Ranger Falls and the route which he was taking was not a direct route to Ranger Falls at all. But Tarrant was apparently content, for as soon as Nine Spot was warm he began to ride through the night in deadly earnest. He left the last derrick of the wildest wildcatters behind and sped out onto the barren, untouched country where he and Nine Spot were alone in the night. To the westward he heard the storm raving and brawling and he bent his head against the rain and swung his quirt and rode on.

Subconsciously his thoughts reverted to the life of his boyhood cowboy days and ran in the channels of that life. For the nonce he ceased to be an oilman and became once more a rider of the plains, free and lonely of soul and boyish and whimsical of mind. The silence of the night and the vastness of space about him, the threatening, unstarred heaven above and gloom-hidden earth beneath, wrought their spell upon him. He was alone in an immensity in which man was of infinitesimal proportions.

The loneliness and the sense of man's inconsequence in the face of the vastness of the signs of the Creator, working its spell as it does upon the lone range rider at night, crept into his bones with the rhythmic thud of Nine Spot's hoofs, the creak of leather, and the wind-whipped rain against his face. He thought of the mission he was on, and subconsciously his thoughts framed themselves into a prayer.

He came out of the mood with a start, and a sense of irreverence oppressed him momentarily; but presently he looked about and, bowing his head, said "Amen."

To the westward the brawl of the storm was diminishing as the norther raced on to the south and Tarrant knew that the first real test was close at hand.

"Get on, Nine Spot!" he shouted, and rode hard.

As he topped the rolling country which told him he was approaching the great bend in the Rio Canyada he slackened his speed and began to conserve his mount's energy for the test that lay ahead. A flash of lightning split the night and he noted with grim satisfaction that his blind ride had carried him less than a mile out of the way. A second flash of light pierced the gloom, and this was no lightning, but a steady beam upon the earth's surface which came racing swiftly up the river road from the east.

Tarrant growled inarticulately at the sight of it, and dashed for the spot where a bridge had been built over the bend. The great searchlight upon Bodine's automobile illumined the road as it curved toward the bridge and the big car came on like a comet. Harsh curses came from the front seat, brakes were shut down sharply and the car slid to a stop with its searchlight gleaming out upon a

torrent of brown tossing water where the bridge had been. Two men leaped out.

"Good heavens! This bridge is gone, too!"

A horse galloped into the beam of light to the brink of the torrent.

"Tarrant!" screamed Bodine.

"Yes, curse you!" roared Tarrant. "I'm going to beat you out!"

"Shove up your hands!"

"You go to hell!"

A pressure of knees, a stroke of the quirt; the horse leaped from the bank, out of the beam of light. There was a splash, a snort. Somewhere out in the darkness Tarrant and Nine Spot were swimming for their lives.

The bed of the Rio Canyada was wide at this point, and now it was bank full with rushing water. With the reins over his arm Tarrant was whipped downstream beside his horse, but his course carried him toward the farther shore. Where the water jammed up against the high bank of the bend there was the semblance of a calm and here he made his fight.

"Nine Spot!" he shouted, blowing the water from his mouth. "Come on!"

The current near shore snatched victory from their grasp and swept them away in the instant their feet touched bottom. The branches of a cottonwood swept Tarrant's face, and lunging out he caught a hold. Ages later it seemed, after a heart-breaking struggle, man and horse dragged themselves out of the clutch of the waters and lay panting on the farther bank. Tarrant mounted when strength permitted. He turned in the saddle and shook his fist at the beam of light up the river.

"There, damn you!" he panted. "Let's see you do that with your fancy car!"

A small rancher on the west side of the Rio Canyada near Big Bend was awakened that night by a drenched rider on a calico horse who rode up and kicked on the kitchen door and demanded instant possession of the mud-stained flivver that stood in the rancher's yard.

"I'm Tarrant, oilman, from Tin Spout," said the rider. "Drive me to the nearest fast car round here. Name your own price."

"Where do you come from?" demanded the startled rancher.

"From Tin Spout."

"You couldn't. Every bridge is down for a hundred miles along the river."

"I swam it. The pinto and I," was the reply. "Have somebody take care of him. Here's the money. Name the amount. Now get in and drive."

A second rancher, who possessed a fast car, was awakened an hour later and pressed into service. Through the night Tarrant was driven over the long road to Ranger Falls and as daylight broke he stood pounding upon Jake Stringer's door. Stringer opened to find a soaking, torn apparition with the light of a determined devil in his eyes.

"Jake, I want to renew that option on the 88 Ranch section," said Tarrant.

"You woke me up for that?" choked Stringer. "Are you crazy, Tarrant?"

"You'll see if you try to hold out," was the grim warning.

"Hold out! Gosh a'mighty, I only got sixty days more."

"Sixty days more; that's what I want."

"But not now, Spence; I got to think."

"Right now!" roared Tarrant. "You renew my option, Jake. You do it right now, or so help me, I'll break your neck!"

CHAPTER XXX

NEWS travels with uncanny swiftness in the oil fields. The telephone wires and the mud-covered cars go everywhere, and such news as this, that Tarrant had reached Ranger Falls in spite of the storm and high water and renewed his option upon the once despised 88 Lease, was too rich to remain hidden.

"Stuck old Jake Stringer up with a six-gun and made him come through, they tell me," was one version.

"Stuck up your grandmother's sister!" ran the counter story. "Jake and him had breakfast together."

The story spread like the light of dawn. It was all over town in a hurry. Such telephone and telegraph wires as had remained up after the storm spread the tale wherever they reached. The drivers of the first service cars to leave town in the morning carried it with them wherever they went.

Out at the Country Club two first-class oilmen, and first-class poker players, with bloodshot eyes and white faces, were sitting behind large stacks of valuable chips representing the winnings of an all-night session when the news was borne thither.

"Tarrant's started something—on the 88 Lease—had a hell of a time over it!"

Buck looked up from his cards, looked at Elmer and shoved his chips across the table.

"I'm cashing in," said he.

"Same here," said Elmer.

Out where stood their muddy dilapidated flivver they again looked at one another.

"Kick me, will you, Buck?" pleaded Elmer.

"Kick you?" snorted Buck scornfully. "You figure your useless carcass worth wasting a kick on?"

"No, coming right down to facts, I don't," said the old man. "I just figured you might do it out of charity, Buck."

"You're a bum," growled Buck.

"I'll say I am, Buck."

"I'm another."

"I agree there, too, Buck."

"We're a couple of bums," continued Buck. "We ain't worth kicking."

Elmer nodded gravely, the Adam's apple in his scrawny throat rising and falling with each movement.

"It's this gambling and running round that's ruined us," said he. "Always knew it would. My old daddy warned me. 'Leave the cards alone,' said he. Buck—Buck, you're young. Let this be a lesson to you. I—I hope Spence knocks hell out of both of us like we deserve."

"We got to get back to Tin Spout pronto," said Buck.

"You darn tooting we have," agreed Elmer.

"The bridges are down."

"Spence got across, didn't he?"

"Get some gas, get some gas!" commanded the young man. "Let's get to the river."

"And if that old *rio* is still up," said Elmer, "blamed if I don't swim her or drown in the attempt."

This desperate course, however, proved to be unnecessary. They drove to a point near where the railroad crossed the Rio Canyada and there they found workmen

on stout rafts recovering pieces of trestlework which had been gnawed out by the brawling waters of the river. Buck talked to the section foreman in charge. He talked with his tongue and all the winning eloquence with which he was gifted. The foreman was adamant.

"No," he said. "Think we're running a ferry?"

Then Buck talked with his poker winnings. He talked with Elmer's winnings. The foreman eyed the bills and shook his head. He eyed them again—and held out his hand.

"Seeing it's you, boys, I'll help you out," he grunted. "Here, swing that raft over to this shore."

The flivver and its two occupants were ferried across.

"Thank heaven I learned how to play cards!" muttered Elmer as they drove toward Tin Spout. "Buck, let this be a lesson to you. When you play cards always try to win."

"We'll go right to the office and take our medicine," said Buck when they rolled into Tin Spout. "Me—I'll take anything he hands us."

"Same here," agreed Elmer, as they swung in sight of the office. "Hello! The door is shut. Who is that standing on the steps, Buck?"

"It's a skirt," said Buck, glancing toward the building.

"It ain't!" said Elmer emphatically. "It's Miss Marjorie."

Marjorie did not smile as they approached. She looked at them closely while they greeted her respectfully and alighted from the car.

"Have you seen Mr. Tarrant?" she asked coldly.

"Haven't seen him, no, Miss Marjorie," replied Elmer. "Heard of him though."

She waited as if expecting him to explain further. She was reluctant to ask any more questions.

"What did you hear?" she said finally.

"Heard he was starting something on the 88 Lease," was the reply. "Heard he got to the Falls and got a renewal from old Jake."

"Is that all you have heard?" she asked.

"Sure is, Miss Marjorie," said Elmer. "Me and Buck come a-jumping soon as we heard."

She studied them carefully. Their faces were hard and haggard and marked by the life they led, but there could be no mistaking the honesty and sincerity that showed in their eyes.

"Yes," she said softly, "I see that you don't know anything about it."

"We was hoping you might tell us," suggested Buck.

"About what?" she said.

"About this 88 Lease business," replied the driller. "We thought mebbe you heard something."

"Oh, that," said Marjorie deprecatingly. "Yes, Mr. Tarrant left a note for you, Elmer. It directed you to get an outfit onto the lease at once."

Elmer whistled softly.

"That will be a job!" he said. "The Syndicate crowd will corral every truck and team in the market."

"The outfit is on the lease," said Marjorie.

"What? Spence—did he get back?"

"No," replied the girl slowly. "I won't take time to explain, but some people who—didn't understand—were friendly to him, and—the outfit went out last night."

"Elmer," said Buck, "that's where we belong right now."

"This note which was addressed to you, Elmer, directed you to get on the lease and remain in spite of everything until Mr. Tarrant returned," she went on.

"Sure! To hold her down against all comers!" cried Elmer repentantly. "Crank up, Buck."

She stepped back as they prepared to depart. She waited until they were seated in the car. Then impulsively she stepped forward.

"Will you do me a very great favor?" she asked.

There was a note of pleading in her tone though she strove to suppress it.

"Miss Marjorie," said Elmer earnestly, "we sure will."

"Will you promise me to tell the truth," she said.

"Sure will."

She hesitated a moment, then with sudden determination:

"Did Mr. Tarrant know that No. 5 was a dry hole before he sold it on the Exchange that night?"

"He sure did, Miss Marjorie," was the reply, "or he wouldn't have sold it."

"Thank you," she said simply.

"What's up, Miss Marjorie?" said Elmer. "Anything we can do?"

"Yes," she said resolutely, after a moment of hesitation, "if anyone should ask, you might remember that I told you I am leaving Tin Spout for good."

The first train to reach Tin Spout from Ranger Falls arrived at nine in the evening, and Tarrant leaped off before the train had come to a full stop. The memory of Marjorie's hand on his shoulder the night before was singing in his heart. She had come to warn him! She

had helped him! In a few short hours the hope and desire of youth had been born anew in him. The reason for her conduct was incomprehensible to him. Had she forgotten or forgiven his brutality that day when he picked her up and kissed her? Did her conduct indicate something more than mere friendliness?

These were problems that occupied Spence Tarrant's mind as, with the young blood leaping in his veins, he strode from the train toward the boarding house of Marjorie and her father. For the moment he had no thoughts of anything else. His feet scarcely touched the ground as he walked. He was oblivious to the glances that followed him, oblivious to the people who stepped aside as he approached and stared after him with black looks as he passed. He was buoyed up by the thoughts which had inspired him through the night. He had won one struggle solely because of her inspiration. He knew full well that the real struggle, the grim fight against the power of the outraged Syndicate, was about to begin. The knowledge did not trouble him. The wondrous new hope in his heart was like an armour. And with his head high and the light of fervour in his eyes he knocked at the boarding-house door.

"She's gone," Mrs. Hemp said at the sight of him. Her tone was curt. "She left this afternoon for Chicago. She ain't ever coming back."

The door slammed, and it was over.

Tarrant recalled but little of the remainder of the night. There was a hazy recollection of visiting the station and questioning a sleepy agent. The agent's manner, which usually was genially respectful toward him, was strange

and cold, but Tarrant's faculties were too much numbed by the words he had heard to detect any difference.

"Went north on No. 1," said the agent. "Her and the Doc'. Tickets to Chicago. Trunks marked to Lakeside Hotel. Anything else?"

Somehow he got out to the lease. He did not remember how or when. He concealed his hurt skilfully. Neither Elmer nor Buck was conscious of any change in him. He asked no questions and volunteered no information. Partly from instinct and training and partly in a fury of frustrated youth he at once took up the task of locating the new well. Throughout the close warm night he worked, silently and grimly and in the same manner Buck and Elmer worked with him. Dawn came. The sun spread rosily over the drab landscape, so that Bodine's spies from their hiding places on near-by rises could watch the activity at the new well.

CHAPTER XXXI

BY the terms of the renewed option he had sixty days in which to bring in a producing well or relinquish his claim to the future of the lease. Tarrant now consecrated himself entirely to this task.

"Boy," Jake Stringer had said upon signing the option, "you got as much chance to finish that hole as a man has starting to build him a herd with one old steer."

"I have heard," retorted Tarrant, "that several men have got together a herd with nothing but a hot iron to start with."

"Mebbe so," agreed Stringer, "but they didn't have the Pan-National Syndicate on the prod against them. You play 'em close to your chest from now on, d'you hear, Spence? You've busted into their corral a couple of times and they don't 'low to let you form the habit. Keep shet of Grogan. You know what I mean. You've got yourself into a real game now. They'll sure call for a showdown."

Tarrant realised better than anyone else how true were Stringer's words. He had staked all on a desperate play. Against him there were desperate men, Bodine and Grogan and their associates and satellites. One or the other side must go under. The Tin Spout field did not have room for him and Bodine. His one chance to win was to bring in a good well within the time limit. If he accomplished this he could clinch a hold on the 88 Lease. If he struck the great pool, which his faith and knowledge told

him was within the realm of possibility, the Syndicate would be done for. Not a foot of the new field would be in their possession. A true boom would be born and Pan-National stock would collapse like a bubble. Wherefore it was improbable that the Syndicate would remain idle and allow him to complete his test.

Tarrant's expression grew calm and hard as he contemplated the situation. He had good friends in the field, but the Syndicate was in control for the present. Virtually he was an Ishmaelite. Such hands as were not against him were strictly neutral. He was forced to bring his rig builders in from far away where news of the struggle had not been spread. When the builders learned of the trouble they balked and he held them to the contract by sheer force of will and determination. His first act on returning to the lease was to build a twelve-foot stockade round the site of the well. His shotgun guards patrolled outside the fence day and night, and the rig builders were not allowed to depart until the derrick was complete. His hardness won the hard workmen he employed. The carpenters shook hands as they departed upon the completion of their job.

The rotary drill with its cumbersome machinery was hung in place. Because of the greater speed with which this type of drill bit through the earth, he had decided to use the rotary system until he approached the depth where he hoped to find the pay sand. Then a change would be made to cable tools and the drilling would continue slowly and with great care.

The steam was turned on and the machinery began to rumble.

"Spud in," said Tarrant, and the drilling of the well began.

Tarrant selected his drilling crew with extra care. Elmer and Buck were each placed in charge of a "tower," as the different shifts are called, and upon their shoulders he placed the responsibility of seeing that the work went on as if he were always present. His deadly determination imparted itself to them and dominated their careless spirits. The lanky Elmer and the boyish Buck alike grew grim, tense, decisive. A tool dresser under Buck's eye allowed a cracked drill bit to go back to the driller; Buck and he fought seriously and silently, and in the end Buck's youth told and the principle of perfect work was definitely and brutally imprinted in the tool dresser's mind.

A Mexican derrick man committed the carelessness of beginning his climb to the crown block with the wisp of a cigarette smouldering beneath his scant mustache, and Elmer leaped up after him with his knife drawn. The Mexican jumped, and lay on his back for a month with a broken leg; and other workmen were careful to avoid such lapses of memory in the future.

Tarrant, during these days, was a cold fury unleashed. Like a tiger guarding his lair he prowled ubiquitously about, his eyes strained for danger signs, his expression a defiance and a menace. Hampered as he was by a ring of enemies and purchased or intimidated neutrals, the task of keeping the drill going was one of infinite detail and petty worry. The power of the Syndicate was made evident by his complete isolation. Tarrant had plenty of friends, and they were not of the sort who would have been turned away or frightened by threats, but the golden promise of the Syndicate was too much for them.

In the madness of the scramble and clutching of sudden wealth, the freaky turns of fortune's whims which brought wealth unexpectedly or took it away likewise, the instinct was not to pause and analyse ethics or character. Men saw things as they were there and at that particular time. They saw that fortune cared not in the least for the individual upon whom it poured its richest favours. They knew that only the weak whined if the game went against them. So chancy a game was it, so uncertain the balance which brought gold or ruin, that the single aim in all minds was to leap and grasp with all power the chance for rich returns the instant it appeared.

This was what the Pan-National Syndicate appeared to offer. It had planned, predicted and promised a boom for Tin Spout, and the boom had appeared. It had promised money to its members in return for uncertain leases, and the money had begun to trickle in. It predicted that Tin Spout would become a city like Ranger Falls; it promised more money—great, certain floods of gold—as soon as the organisation machinery was complete, and what good reasons were there for doubting that these promises, too, would be fulfilled? The promise was too great, too dazzling. Men who could not have been frightened from Tarrant's side were lured by the golden prospect, as metals are lured by the magnet's power.

Tarrant had to go it alone. He did. The cold vigilance of his eye and the bleak tightness of his lips prevented many from hindering though they would not help. His coup in assembling materials for the rig, and materials and the initial string of casing and rushing them onto the lease at night alone had enabled him to make a start. After that the boycott began to work against him.

His orders for more casing were canceled. A new drill stem and jar which he had ordered lay rusting beneath a foot of mud where it had been buried upon its arrival at Tin Spout. Oil for fuel for the boiler was shut off. Water for drilling was a difficult matter. And the replacement of worn-out and broken tools and material was a constant struggle.

The job went on. Tarrant got what he needed. He bought and borrowed what he could; what he could not buy or borrow he took. There was no question of ethics involved. In the phrenetic scramble to drive a hole in the earth deep enough to reach the oil strata it was universally acknowledged that all other considerations were subordinated to the simple principle of accomplishment.

Men grasped madly at whatever tools they needed and could find. The fact that these tools might belong to someone else had only a slight bearing on the matter, provided they could be secured and used. Title to ownership of material was a tenuous matter; possession and use, everything. At one time, later on, when the true oil boom came to Tin Spout, there was under control of the courts over a million dollars' worth of well material, title to which had been distressingly clouded by continued stealing and restealing. Men were in a frenzy of fever, and they recognised no law save the law of accomplishment.

Tarrant's job needed sundry material, and being ruthlessly boycotted by the power of the Syndicate, he became ruthless himself, and his job got the material it needed. Afterwards, after the desperate drive and accomplishment were a matter of local history, he would retrace his way and settle for the wreckage. He did not think of that at present, however. The man who had material which the

job needed and who refused to sell it, was to him a natural enemy. He treated him as such. Being a little stronger, a little more ruthless and a great deal more determined than these for the nonce natural enemies, he usually had his way. And his conscience troubled him exactly as much as a tiger is troubled over obstacles which he cuffs out of his trail.

The progress of the well was painfully slow despite the speed with which the rotary drill gnawed its way through the earth. A series of accidents served to delay the work when it had got fairly under way. In fact Tarrant's Wildcat No. 6 fell heir to all the misfortune which makes oil drilling so speculative a proposition. A great bowlder was struck in a formation where no amount of geological information or experience could have foreseen its presence. Immediately after this obstacle had been overcome a string of casing buckled in the hole. The two accidents and the consequent strain and worry temporarily shattered the morale of the crew. A drill bit was jarred off and work was shut down while the crew fished for the tool.

Days of precious time were lost in this manner. The period of the option was rapidly dwindling away and the well log showed that the drill was far from the depth at which Tarrant hoped to find the pay sand. Elmer and Buck counted the days which remained for them to complete the well in, and estimated the number of feet and the formation through which they must drill.

"We will make the grade," said Buck decisively when their estimate had been made.

"How come?" demanded Elmer.

"It comes this way," retorted the driller. "We've done drew all the hard luck that was out against us. I don't

say that from now on it will all come our way, but the percentage is in our favor. Give us an even break and on the eighth we'll be down to that level where Spence figures the pay to lay here. That will give us a margin of five days according to my figuring."

"Five days!" piped Elmer excitedly. "You sure of that, Buck? For Mike's sake get that calendar—let's see the mark—gosh-a-whistling, you're right!"

"Going nuts?" demanded Buck calmly.

"On the thirteenth!" exclaimed Elmer. "Look at the calendar yourself. Spence's option expires at noon on the thirteenth. Darn the luck! We're licked. There won't be anything in that sand even if we do hit it in time. Thirteen on the option means no oil in the well."

At seventeen hundred feet the change to the cable-tool system of drilling was made. Buck's confidence in the future seemed justified. The hard luck appeared to have departed. The formation now was easily drilled. The great steel bit, with tons of metal driving it, went on down and down without any untoward delays and the casing followed it without accident.

As the drill went down the price of crude oil continued to go up. The demand for gasoline, even at unheard-of prices, was insatiable. High-gravity crude went to two dollars and seventy-five cents a barrel. Refiners were fighting one another for the stuff. Bribes and premiums paid to well owners became the rule. Crude oil jumped to three dollars a barrel, and in the Northern Texas fields refiners were paying a premium of twenty-five cents a barrel.

"If the boss hits it now," said Buck, "he's a made man."

"He won't," persisted Elmer positively. "Thirteen on the option means no oil in the well."

Tarrant himself was at the well day and night now. Each time that the tools were raised and the hole bailed he analysed the slush as it was poured into the pool. He found little to encourage him. The bailer showed the old formation of shale and gumbo alternating, and clay, with no trace of the lime caprock which he expected to find overlying the oil sand. With the true oilman's faith, however, each run of the bailing bucket was a new beginning. What had gone before was forgotten. His faith was unshaken. Any run of the bailer might be the one to justify this faith.

The first serious blow to him came when the log indicated that the well was at the depth where he had found the dry sand in Well No. 5, and still no showing of caprock or sand. Was it possible that he had erred and located the well too far to the north? He checked up his figures and appraised the location for the dozenth time and found them all as he wished.

"We must have got outside that deep sand," suggested Buck.

"No," replied Tarrant, "it lies deeper than I figured. Keep drilling."

They drilled to a depth of two thousand feet and still there was no change in the formation.

"Keep drilling," was the order.

They went to 2100 feet, an unheard-of depth in that field.

"We're way deeper than any pay sand in this part of the country now," reminded Buck.

"We'll go another hundred feet," was the response.

"Then we have to scare up a new string of casing," announced Buck.

This was serious. The supply of casing had been practically shut off to Tarrant. The Syndicate's influence had served to cancel or delay his orders, or to divert to other fields casing which was being shipped to him. The supply of pipe on hand would have been sufficient had the sand been found at the expected depth. He had been unable to procure any more at the time. But more casing must be had. There was no other solution to the problem.

"How much have you got left, Buck?" he asked.

"A single length," replied the driller.

"Better let me and Buck go see if we can corral some, boss," suggested Elmer. "You are too well known. Me and Buck now, somebody might let us have some."

"You are right," agreed Tarrant. "Take the truck and go to it."

CHAPTER XXXII

ELMER and Buck rolled away toward town in silence. They had both lost faith in the new well. They felt their work to be useless. It was not ethical to express themselves to this effect, however, so they rode for a long time in silence. At last Buck swore at the condition of the road, and the spell was broken.

"Yes, sir," said Elmer, rousing himself, "the road's like the rest of this country now; she's plumb ruined. It used to be different. I was here as a young fellow, riding range for the old 88 Ranch when she was a ranch. Boy, you could start your pony in any direction and go to sleep and ride all day without running into anything high enough to stop you. S'pose you'd get a little too much in town at night and the boys had to load you. You'd get out of town and pick out the star over the ranch house and head straight for that star. If you'd see two stars you'd head for between them. Then all you had to do was to stay in the saddle and the pony would do the rest. There wasn't any derricks or cities or skyscrapers—they wasn't even a fence to hinder you. Just head for the right star, like a sailor, and you'd come home snoring."

"Suppose there wasn't any stars," said Buck, the realist.

Elmer regarded him with a grieved expression.

"I knew a young fellow named Buck once who was a good party," he said. "Knew enough not to show his ignorance by interrupting his elders. No, gents, you can't tell by the name what kind of formation a man's made of."

"I wish we couldn't get any casing," said Buck suddenly.

"Meaning?"

"Then we would have to stop drilling," explained the driller. "Spence has gone bugs on that hole. She's a dead one. I hate to see him shove any more money down her."

"He don't drink," retorted Elmer; "he won't go to town and gamble. Let him spend his money as he likes. That's all I ever found the stuff good for."

"That's because you're so ignorant, Elmer," explained Buck. "Me—when I see money I see silk shirts and jewelry. That's what education does for you, Elmer."

"Yep," agreed the old man, "and girls."

"Ignorance again," said the driller sorrowfully. "Feminine company is uplifting and refining. Look at me; then gaze on you. What could be plainer? Don't speak whereof you don't know."

"Ho!" snorted the old man. "Nobody knows nothing about girls, if it comes to that. I came scand'lous nigh being married by one of them on account of that once. Girl named Carrie. Her dad was a rig builder down in the Corsicana field and Carrie was doing the cooking for the crew. She takes to me, and to warn her away I let the rumour spread round and reach her ears that I'm a renegade Mormon and deserted three wives back in Utah. Hanged if it didn't make Carrie aspire to be Number Four! I traveled. Left four days' pay due me, too."

"Poor Carrie!" yawned Buck. "She'll never know what she missed."

They jolted into Tin Spout and as a strategic manœuver parked their truck at the rear of a long shed in which a pile of Syndicate casing was stored.

An oil gauger, passing by, glanced at them and, recognizing them, quickly turned his eyes elsewhere.

"Hello, Bud!" called Buck.

The man looked back at them, spat and went on.

"Is that bird deaf?" demanded the driller.

"He wasn't the last time I see him," replied Elmer.

The man disappeared round the corner. Presently a head peered round the bank building, looked at them, and disappeared.

"Let's go down to Chili Joe's and get a cup of coffee," suggested Buck.

"Coffee!" muttered Elmer. "Can't you see something's up? We ain't as popular as we used to be, for some reason."

"Reckon not?" said the younger man. "Then I reckon we'll be finding out why."

"There's the law," said Elmer, indicating the town marshal who was crossing the street.

"Hey, John Law!" cried Buck. "Hold on a minute."

The officer halted, looked at them, turned his head and went on his way.

"Well," said Buck, "we ain't wanted, anyway."

Elmer's shaggy brows were drawn down over his eyes.

"I feel," said he, "something like I did the time I wandered into a camp of *cholas* down in Sonora just when they were figuring how to bump me off."

"Speaking personally," said Buck, "I'm getting a little peeved."

"You hang onto your shirt," retorted Elmer. "This is something that requires careful trailing."

"There's Lafe," said Buck, espying the garage man across the street. "He's a buddy of mine. Come on."

Lafe was not pleased at the sight of his buddy. He did not return Buck's salutation.

"What in blazes is up, Lafe?" demanded the driller. "We ain't poison."

Lafe swung round on him angrily.

"Don't play me for a damn fool, Buck, please," he said hotly. "You knew it was dry. How much did Tarrant pay you to help his game along?"

Buck and Elmer stared at one another.

"You ain't talking to me, Lafe," said the driller. "Explain a little, please."

"Tarrant sold Mr. Bodine No. 5 for a guaranteed well, didn't he?" came the reply. "Bodine gave the town people first crack at the stock. Naturally everybody bought. Tarrant worked the play up slick, I'll say that for him. Building a good reputation to cash in on. Nobody was on to him until Bodine showed him up. Tarrant knew it was a dry hole, outside the field. Let his friends get stuck! He was wise in staying away; he knew he was through here. Bodine is big enough to make good. Issuing Pan-National stock share for share of the swindle. I reckon you wasn't in it, Buck. Reckon Tarrant kept it all for himself, same as he did of what he got out of Wayne."

"Don't hit him, Buck," said Elmer sternly. "Lafe has lost some money and it hurts."

"It ain't just losing the money that hurts," said the garage man. "You boys know the kind of faith folks had in Spence Tarrant. He meant something to us. Then the way he fooled that girl. Broke her all up when she learned what he was, they tell me. Her pop had to take

her away. Tarrant had played himself up so fine with her she actually helped him get that new option, though it seems her pop had sized up Tarrant all the time and had warned her how he was bound to turn out. Dickinson put every dollar he could borrow into that swindle of Tarrant's. From what I hear, though, Bodine has consoled them considerable. Bodine will have it all his own way there now. Too bad about Tarrant. He sure is through here."

"Buck, you keep your shirt on, I tell you," admonished Elmer. "This is something for Spence to handle his black self. Bodine has put a trick over. Lafe, there'll be dead men over this."

"I don't believe it," responded Lafe. "A man who will pull tricks like that isn't the kind to fight."

"Meaning Tarrant?" flared Buck. "He didn't pull any swindle. And fight? Man, he'll come in and shoot daylight through Bodine."

"I'll believe when I see it," was the reply.

"We're in after casing, Buck," reminded Elmer.

Lafe shook his head.

"Don't you boys try to get anything in this town," he said grimly. "I'm saying that friendly, mind you. I know you're all right, but there's folks here—— You go hunt for casing some place else. Don't you waste any time here."

"I guess he's right, Buck," said Elmer after a survey of the hostile stares directed at them.

"I'll go with you till you're out of town," volunteered the garage man. "Don't say 'no.' There's a new crowd in town. Bad ones who run with Grogan. They killed

a couple roughnecks out at the Country Club the other night. Some say Grogan did it himself. Be friendly and vamoose, boys. That's sensible. This ain't no place for anyone who is working for Tarrant."

CHAPTER XXXIII

TARRANT'S manner of receiving the story which Elmer and Buck reluctantly told upon their return from town was such as to puzzle his loyal henchmen sorely. He sat on a base timber and listened without a trace of emotion in his eyes until they were done.

"So that was it?" he said.

"That is it," corrected Buck.

Tarrant looked up. The new light in his eyes was beyond comprehension. It was not the blazing light of anger the pair had expected. Tarrant sensed the disappointment in his two friends and hastened to assure them.

"I'll take care of it, boys," he said.

"Sure," said Elmer, "we knew you'd want to know."

"That's right," Tarrant said.

"We'll go with you," blurted Buck.

"I reckon we will," supplemented Elmer. "Yes, sir, I reckon me and Buck will do just that little thing."

Tarrant did not reply. He rose and walked away from the derrick to be alone. When he returned he said:

"I am going away for a few days. I don't want a man to leave the job. Your pay goes on the same as if we were drilling."

"You going to Tin Spout?" demanded Elmer, barring his way.

"No," said Tarrant.

"Sure 'nough?" demanded the old man.

"I am not going to Tin Spout," replied Tarrant. "I give you my word I am not going after Bodine—now."

He drove to Ranger Falls by a roundabout route, avoiding Tin Spout, and caught the local evening train for the east. At Dennison he alighted from the local to await the night train from Fort Worth. The train was late. He paced up and down in the darkness at one end of the station, impatient of the delay. The flashing headlight of the flyer as it roared into sight brought a trace of relief to his tense nerves. This train would bear him away from the oil country at express speed. He entered a sleeping car. It was near midnight, but a brown hand shot out from the half-open door of a lighted compartment and caught him by the arm.

"Spence Tarrant! You ol' wildcat!" hailed maudlin voices from within. "Just the man we're looking for! C'mon in; the liquor's fine!"

Tarrant looked at the four oilmen in the room. Stacks of money and playing cards lay on the table. Four right hands reached forward to grasp his hands; four left hands, each grasping a quart bottle partly emptied, waved a supplementary invitation.

"Thanks, boys, but I can't join you," said Tarrant firmly.

"On er job, Spence?"

"Yes," replied he, "I'm on a job."

"S'all right if you're on er job," floated after him as he went on down the aisle to his berth. "We, Us & Company —we're happy lil' boys out o' school."

In the morning he changed at Tulsa and caught a train which would give him the fastest connection out of Kansas City. All day long he sat staring out upon the hot dusty landscape and the hotter and dustier towns along the line. He could not get away from oil. Each freight

train that was passed seemed to him to consist solely of casing and timbers and empty tank cars being hauled southward to the oil fields, or of filled tank cars on their way north and east. The vastness and importance of the industry impressed itself upon him. Crude oil seemed to have become as the very life-blood of modern industry. The knowledge that he was a part of it, was indeed one of those whose faith and knowledge were constantly bringing in for man's use new sources of the vital fluid, failed to thrill him. The very thought of oil hurt.

In the evening the train halted for supper and Tarrant suddenly was aware that he had not eaten since the day before. He tumbled out and joined in the onslaught on the Fred Harvey eating house. The waitress who took his order was young and slender and fair haired. Tarrant left five dollars on the table when he arose, and went back to his seat in the train.

The great Union Station in Kansas City at night was a relief to him because it seemed to him to simulate a vast portal where the oil fields were definitely left behind. He caught the California Limited bound Chicagoward by a narrow margin. As he dropped into his section the porter's face lighted with a grin of recognition.

"Ah done carried you befo', suh," he explained. "You an oilman. Ah used to run on the Frisco down in Texas. Yes, suh."

A thin, harried woman in the seat across the aisle looked up at the words.

"Pardon me, are you an oilman?" she demanded unabashed. "Well, I wish you'd tell me about some shares. It's the Pan-National Syndicate. That's a good company, isn't it?"

"Have you bought any?" asked Tarrant.

She had. She was a school-teacher from Michigan. She had invested her savings of years in Syndicate stock. It was wonderful what fortunes were made in oil.

He escaped to the club car without having committed himself. The game was greater even than he had thought. It was like a vast octopus stretching its tentacles out from those squalid towns in the Southwest and drawing from the farthest corners of the land the savings of people charmed by the siren song of quick wealth.

He awoke next morning feeling chilled. He slid up the curtain of his window and glanced out. Long, mouse-colored piles of dirt met his view and occasionally a glimpse of water, and he recognised them as the spoil banks of the drainage canal. Chicago was next. He rose and shaved and dressed carefully.

"You got nice time to get yo' brekfas', suh," volunteered the porter. Oilmen are invariably generous.

"Yes," said Tarrant, "I suppose I ought to eat. They say a man usually needs a hearty breakfast before being hung."

The long train was rolling into the old Polk Street Station when he finished his meal. Porters and baggagemen were perspiring and muttering against the heat, but to Tarrant the morning was deliciously cool. He entered a taxicab before the station.

"The Lakeside Beach Hotel," said he to the driver.

"Yes, sir."

It was a long ride. To Tarrant it seemed longer than the journey from Tin Spout to Chicago. As the car sped up the Lake Shore Drive and the waters of Lake Michigan came in view a shiver ran through him. He shook

himself. Was it a premonition? Was it only the breeze from the lake acting upon his sun-soaked tissues? He closed the windows in the cab as they rolled through Lincoln Park, but the sensation of coldness did not leave him.

The great hotel far up on the north side on the very edge of the lake might have impressed him more had he not known that a good part of the money that had made its cool magnificence possible had sprung from the mucky, sweltering oil fields of the Southwest. He was glad Marjorie was at a place like this. It was the proper setting for her.

She was not in her room or about the hotel. A bell boy volunteered the information that he had seen her walking down the beach. Tarrant followed the curving beach of firm, cool sand in the direction indicated. It was too early for the beach to be thronged with bathers, but a number of children were disporting themselves in the shallow water, and well inshore, in the shade of a parasol, sat Marjorie.

His footsteps made no sound on the moist sand as he approached, but she started while he was far away and looked up and saw him. A look of distress came upon her face like a cloud.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded. "You have no right. I had almost forgotten."

"I came because I have a right," he said steadily. "A man has the right to clear his name. I have come to clear mine with you."

She looked at him with an expression that told him she now wished him to consider himself a stranger to her, but he continued firmly:

"I am not a swindler. I told Mr. Bodine that No. 5

was a dry hole. I told other people. They would not believe me; they thought I was talking for effect. Bodine knew the well was no good when he offered the stock in Tin Spout. He kept his knowledge secret until the stock was disposed of. Then he laid the blame on me. I just learned of all this the other day. I have been out at my new well night and day, shut off from the world. I came here first, to find you and tell you this, because, regardless of the future, your opinion of me is more valuable to me than that of the rest of the world. But I am going to get back the good opinion of others, too. I had a good reputation down there. I've kept square always.

"If the people there were normal they would know I wouldn't be guilty of that sort of a trick—letting them lose their money. But they are not normal. The boom has made them half crazy, and they are swayed by every rumour. When things become normal they will see more clearly, but I am not going to wait for that. I am going back to Tin Spout and clear my name now. You have got to admit that you took the word of other people for my alleged swindling. Now I ask you to take my word for my squareness—until I have proved it absolutely."

A gentle wave swept in from the lake, rolling up the beach and breaking into foam at their feet. She traced a pattern in the wet sand with her toe before replying.

"There was proof," she said. "Everyone accepted it as proof; I had to. A skilful business man like Mr. Bodine would not have bought your well if he had known it was dry."

"He didn't know—until the deal was made," replied Tarrant.

"Oh! But I thought you said——"

"Marjorie," he interrupted, "men in the oil game know that they buy oil wells before production at their own risk. That is the rule. I knew Bodine was after my No. 5 lease. I knew he would buy me out if he had a chance. I gave him the chance. I did not say a word about the well being a producer. When I had his money I told him it was dry. I told him why I wanted his money—to drill another well. I wanted it because I had faith in that field. I felt—I knew—there was a great pool of oil there somewhere waiting to be discovered and used, and I needed that money to drill more tests with. I had to have it—or let the Syndicate run me out of the field I developed, that I made practically. My job wasn't done. I had faith then—in the field and in myself—I felt I hadn't done justice to the game, and myself. Now I don't care so much. But I do care about being labeled a swindler. They can't make me out that."

The girl looked up at him. His lean, sun-burned face was turned toward the lake and his closely pursed eyes were staring out over the sunny water and far beyond. She winced as she observed his mouth. The boyishness had gone out of his face. His mouth was hard, hard and bitter, like the mouth of the older men who played the oil game.

"Why do you say you *had* faith?" she demanded softly. "Is your faith—gone?"

"Pretty near," he replied, unmoving.

"No," she spoke softly; her tone was almost a plea. "Oh, no, no, no!"

"I beg pardon?" said he.

"You must not lose faith," she protested. "Oh, no

matter what happens, you must not do that. It—it hurts so terribly!"

"How do you know?" he demanded. "Ah! You lost faith in me?" His voice broke and he pleaded hoarsely. "Don't! For your own sake, please. Don't think of me, or how I feel. But don't let yourself be hurt like that. I swear there is no reason for it. Give me time. I will prove it to you."

"Will you?" she said.

"I will. I will make them admit——"

"No, no! I don't mean that!" she cried. "Will you keep your faith—in yourself, and your work? Just as you had before this happened. Oh, you must. You must justify that faith. Promise me, promise you will!"

He looked at her in amazement. Her spirit stirred his spirit and roused it out of the slough of despond into which it had sunk.

"Justify that faith?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes, yes. It is too fine to let perish. Too precious. Ah!" Her eyes lighted up as she saw the change that came over his countenance. "I knew it, I knew it! You haven't lost your faith at all."

"And you," said Tarrant. "Have you really lost your faith in me?"

"Prove that you have not lost your faith," she said. "Prove that first."

"Will that bring back your faith in me?" he asked.

She would not reply.

"Is that what you want me to do?" he said.

"Yes," she replied promptly. "That is what I want to see. Can't you see—can't you understand—what it means?"

That night at the open-air symphony concert at Ravinia Park Marjorie turned suddenly upon her father.

"I am going back to Tin Spout to-morrow," she announced. "I ordered my reservation this afternoon."

"Tin Spout?" he exclaimed. "Are you mad, Marjorie?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "But at all events, I am going."

CHAPTER XXXIV

TARRANT went directly to his lease upon his return to Tin Spout. The rig was shut down. Buck and Elmer saw him as he came and they recognised that a change had come over their employer. His mere presence galvanised the despondent crew.

"Get steam up," he ordered briskly. "We will keep on drilling. I know we are deeper than that sand can possibly lay; you needn't trouble to tell me again. That doesn't make any difference. We are still drilling."

"I reckon you went up North and got some money, eh, Spence," suggested Elmer.

"Money?" laughed Tarrant. "Why, Elmer, money isn't half as potent in drilling oil wells as what I have got."

"You ain't been drinking liquor?"

"No, you old reprobate!"

"Well, I'm here to say it takes money to make the bull wheel turn," retorted Elmer, "and if you've got something that can beat it for putting holes in the ground you've got something I never see, and I've seen some oil."

"Have you got any casing coming, Spence?" asked Buck more practically.

"No."

"Not any?"

"Not a length, Buck."

"And still you say we are to start drilling then?"

"Absolutely," replied Tarrant.

"It ain't sense," protested the driller. "No casing! We are asking for a caved hole, you know that."

"I know it, Buck," said Tarrant. "It can't be helped. The important thing is to drill. We haven't got any casing—can't get any. If the hole caves on us—well, we're going to drill anyway."

"I see," said Buck. "Playing your luck to the limit."

"Something like that," agreed his employer. "Let's go."

The drilling was resumed with infinite care, and Tarrant scrutinised the composition of the frequent bailings closely. There was no change in the formation. The drill was in a stiff clay. This was fortunate under the circumstances as it was not likely to cave in as they drilled. However, it held no promise of uncovering the porous sand in which the oil is found.

They were below the 2000-foot strata now and by the test of all geological knowledge as well as of practical experience they had drilled to a greater depth than it was possible for an oil sand to exist in that formation. The drillers grumbled at wasted labour. They were being paid well enough and the grub was satisfactory, but they were men with some pride. They did not wish to put in their time on a job after it had been proved a folly. Yet they remained, and the drill went downward. Rough and unthinking as they were, they had sensed that there was something different about Tarrant's insistence that the drilling continue. They knew that he was better aware than they, or anyone else, that the limit of expectation had been definitely passed. Yet they noticed no weakening on his part. His spirit imparted itself to them. They would see him through.

The one ray of fortune was that, in spite of the lack of casing, the hole showed no signs of caving. The bailer

brought up nothing new. There was no sign of cap rock or oil sand. There was nothing but clay, and there would be no oil in the clay.

"He's sure a glutton for punishment," said one of the guards at supper one night. "He don't seem to know when he's got enough."

Buck shook his head.

"It can't go on," he said. "No man can stand the gaff much longer, not even Tarrant."

But it did go on. It went on through the remaining days and nights of his option. The day before the thirteenth dawned, and there was no change in the formation. At noon, with twenty-four hours remaining of the option, a car came jolting up to the lease and Arkansaw, the gambler, was escorted by a guard inside the stockade.

"Something for you alone, Spence," said the wicked young man.

Tarrant led the way into his sleeping quarters.

"You'll be through here at noon to-morrow, I suppose, Spence?" began the gambler.

"I am afraid so," said Tarrant.

"Figuring on coming into Tin Spout then?"

"Look here, Arkansaw!" laughed Tarrant. "What are you going to do, take pity on me and offer me a job? Man, I'm not that broke. I've got the rig yet. I'm a plutocrat."

"Grogan is in town," said Arkansaw seriously. "He is waiting for you to come in to-morrow. He's gone bad. Shot a lad out at the Club yesterday. He—he's talking."

"Meaning?" suggested Tarrant.

"Yep. He's announcing to get you," responded the gambler. "Thought you ought to know."

"I'm obliged," said Tarrant politely.

There was an embarrassed silence.

"Spence," broke out Arkansaw, "there ain't any real call for you to go down there. That business about No. 5 is all understood now. The boys have took back what they thought. Folks know you wouldn't have stuck right here and drilled if you had put that over."

"I'm obliged for that, too, Arkansaw."

His gentleness sent a shock through the gambler.

"Spence! What's the use—" he began, but one glance from Tarrant's eyes silenced him.

"Shake hands, Arkansaw," said Tarrant as they parted. "It was sure friendly of you to come out."

Tarrant watched the bailing all day, his face a bronzed mask which concealed the emotions struggling within him. As Buck had said, no man could continue to stand the strain. When the last bailer on the day tower was dumped and examined Tarrant stood up and brushed his hands together softly.

"Well, I tried to justify that faith thing," he said slowly to himself. "Now I am at liberty to attend to that other matter."

"What's that, boss?" asked Buck.

"None of your darn business!" laughed Tarrant. A load of responsibility seemed to have fallen from his shoulders. He swung his fist playfully at the driller, with the old reckless leaping into his manner.

"Your job is drilling this well, feller," he said. "You're hired to stay here till the job is through. That means exactly sixty minutes after eleven o'clock to-morrow noon. Then you can pull your tools and draw your money and go hooch-hunting. Until that fatal moment, party, you

keep that drill going. Me, I have got important business matters which I have neglected too long."

Clean shaven and freshly clad, from shoes to coat, he mounted Nine Spot and set out for town.

"I sure did try to justify that faith thing," he mused as his journey's end came in sight. "Calico hoss, they're waiting for me to come in with my tail between my legs to-morrow. I can't quite see myself doing it, can you? Whoa, you ornery, four-hoofed reptile! What you shying at? That's only the celebrated oil town of Tin Spout, where we play the last hand in this game and call for a show-down."

And out at the well at this moment the drill was driving into the long-sought-for limestone cap rock.

CHAPTER XXXV

TIN SPOUT sweltered in its dust at the end of a scorching day. The sun was setting, but the cloudless dome of the hot sky still held the light of day, revealing unmercifully the inherent unloveliness of the squalid collection of buildings, which, as the boom oil town of the hour, was nationally famous. And yet, beneath that vast luminous sky and with the hush of sunset heavy upon the earth and the towns thereof, Tin Spout was not hopeless. Its men were a dominant race. Their very indifference to the sordidness of their environment marked them as superior to it. There was strength there. Thin, grave riders from the ranches, their hard, brown faces abnormally clean shaven, moved slowly along the boardwalks, the stiffness of their gait betraying the boots concealed beneath their trouser legs. The roughnecks, the operators, the adventurers of the oil fields swarmed in the street, taking their rough masculine leisure after the day's work in the gnawing sun.

The phrenetic bustle normal to the place was subdued for the while, and men sat on the edge of the sidewalks, smoked slowly, spoke sanely. And then the peace of the moment was gone. Men crowded together, whispered swiftly, stared about excitedly. It was not the excitement of a new well. That excitement usually had its inception to the tune of loud swift words, superfluous profanity and yells. The eyes of men now glittered with the excitement of something more tremendous even than new oil and money.

Tarrant was in town. Grogan was looking for him. The news seemed to flash about as if on an electric current. No one knew who started the story. No one could remember having heard it stated in so many words. It simply was known.

Tarrant had not entered town by the main street, but had ridden to the livery stable near the old cattle pens practically unobserved. He paid the barn man for Nine Spot's board in advance.

"If Elmer or Buck come for him they are to have him," he explained, and buttoning the bottom button of his blue serge coat, he started to walk uptown. His way led past Mrs. Hemp's boarding house. The door was open and Tarrant stopped. Was it a flood of memory that halted him and held him there in fascination? Then why did he have the sensation of a hand upon his arm? A light hand, a touch that stirred him! Why did he have a feeling that Marjorie Dickinson had caught him by the sleeve? A tremor like a sudden chill ran through him. He looked round with alarmed eyes.

"That sure was queer," he mused.

He tried to go on. He could not. He found himself standing at Mrs. Hemp's screen door without knowing why he had come. And then he was standing face to face with Marjorie and stammering his surprise that she was there.

"I left Chicago the day after you did," she said.

She volunteered no explanation. She only studied his face. And his face was set and hard.

"Oh, what have you done?" she cried. "Why didn't you keep your promise?"

A sense of complete failure descended upon him; he

understood the premonitory chill that had smitten him outside the door. He could not measure up to her. He had aspired to something too fine for him to achieve. His mission in town this evening proved it.

"I tried," he said. "I couldn't make it."

"You tried—but you have given up?" she accused. "You have let yourself slip back. Oh, how could you?"

Tarrant had nothing to say. He was afraid that if he remained she would see the full darkness into which his soul had descended. He could not alter that. The die was cast. He was what he was; and this being so he must step out of her life. He must do so at once.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said harshly.

"Yes, you do," she insisted. "You know you do. You proved it to me the other day by the lake up in Chicago."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he repeated. "I haven't got any time for such nonsense. I—have got to see a man who is waiting for me."

"You are going?" she cried incredulously.

"Yes; this is important."

"But—but why did you come here then?"

Tarrant looked away.

"I came to say there was a pretty rough crowd in town to-night," he said. "They're tearing loose. You can't tell what will be doing. I just came to say it would be a good evening to keep off the street."

He turned and smiled upon her as she stared at him in bewilderment.

"I would stay right here if I were you," he said. "Well —so long."

He backed away, still smiling.

She did not see, and she could not have imagined, the change that came over his face, like a bitter black cloud dropping over the sun, which took place the instant his back was turned. She seated herself, hopelessly bewildered. In spite of the heat she shivered.

"All alone, honey?" greeted Mrs. Hemp, issuing from the kitchen. "Thought I heard a man's voice in here."

"Mr. Tarrant was here," said Marjorie.

"Here. Drink it while it's cold." Mrs. Hemp placed a glass of lemonade before the girl and proceeded to regale herself from another. "That devil Grogan is after Tarrant," continued the worthy lady as she rocked and sipped. "Men sure are the peskiest things alive."

Marjorie sat as if numbed. She heard the rocker creak noisily under Mrs. Hemp's generous weight. The last rays of the setting sun slanted through the screen door upon the rug at her feet. For an instant the sunlight was obscured by the passing shadows of two men going down the street. Their low, heavy voices floated distinctly into the quiet, hot room.

"Wonder if Tarrant knows Grogan is out after him?" spoke one.

"Reckon he does," drawled the other. "They tell me he's wearing his coat."

Then they were gone.

"Ain't you going to drink your lemonade, honey?" asked Mrs. Hemp. "It won't keep cold long in this weather."

Marjorie stood up. Her knees were trembling.

"Did you hear what those men said, Mrs. Hemp?" she said.

"Oh, men's talk!" was the reply. "I don't pay much attention to them. I always say we women——"

"Will you be kind enough to tell me the significance of Mr. Tarrant wearing his coat this evening?" demanded Marjorie.

Mrs. Hemp began. "Now, honey, don't you——"

"Did he have a weapon under it?" asked Marjorie coldly.

"Why, how should I know, honey?" protested Mrs. Hemp.

Marjorie was insistent. "Is that why he wore a coat—to conceal a weapon?" she went on.

"If you gotta know," flared the old ranch woman, "I reckon it is. But don't you go working yourself up into a lather, honey, about men's affairs; they ain't worth it. I always say we women——"

Marjorie said something about "we women" which left Mrs. Hemp shocked and gaping. The girl flared with sudden resolution, and then she felt weak and numb. Her knees threatened to give way, and she attempted to bite her upper lip and found her lips were trembling.

"You ain't going to faint, honey?" stammered Mrs. Hemp.

"Faint!" Marjorie stared at the complacent woman furiously. "You sit there and—aren't you going to do anything?"

"Me?" gasped Mrs. Hemp.

"Aren't you going to try to stop it?"

"Why, Honey! Them things can't be stopped. Men are built that way."

A step sounded outside and a tall quiet cowboy pressed his nose against the screen door.

"Excuse me," said he, "but if Spence Tarrant is here, will you ladies tell him a friend would like to see him."

"What is it?" demanded Marjorie.

"Oh, nothing important, lady," was the evasive reply. "I just got a message for him, that's all."

"What is it? Tell me! I—will tell him," she insisted.

"Tell him," said the cowboy, "to be careful—or the marshal might interfere."

He went away, clumsily touching his heavy sombrero, and Marjorie turned again to Mrs. Hemp.

"Is that your attitude, too?" she demanded.

"Honey, it's this way," broke out the woman swiftly, "Spence Tarrant can't let himself be run out of town, and that devil Grogan is out to do it. Ain't that plain and simple? I know it's nothing but fool-boy nonsense and you know it, but men are built to be fools, and they're just bound to have their own way. That Grogan has got a terrible name, I know, but I guess Spence Tarrant can take care of himself no matter who is after him, so there!"

"Do you realise what you are saying?" said Marjorie. "Do you realise what it means for him to—take care of himself?"

"Why, yes," said Mrs. Hemp, "I do realise it, probably a little better than you do, but I know what you mean. Well, it is wrong, of course, but there are a whole lot of things in this world that are wrong, and I own up I've sort of give up trying to set them right."

"Why, it's outrageous, it's barbaric!" cried Marjorie. "I never dreamed that such things still existed."

"Honey, I've noticed that about you folks that come from up North," the old woman said. "You sort of seem to have the notion that because a thing didn't exist in your

life back there it hasn't got any right to exist at all, but I never noticed that what you'uns thought made things any different down here."

"Tell me," demanded Marjorie, "what I can do to stop it!"

"It ain't women's business," said Mrs. Hemp firmly.

"Tell me," insisted the girl.

"There's just one thing I know of that might be of any use," said the woman, regarding her with a disapproving eye.

"Tell me—tell me!"

"You might hunt up Spence Tarrant," was the scornful reply, "and ask him to tuck his tail between his legs and get out of town so Grogan can't find him. But you won't do that, because you got sense. And it wouldn't do any good if you did."

Tarrant slowly retraced his steps to the livery stable. The accusing look in Marjorie's eyes had shaken him. He could not flee. That was out of the question. By all the tenets of his code, or the code of the men whom he called friends, that was forbidden. Neither could he seek Grogan now. That, too, was forbidden by the influence she held upon him.

At the barn he upended a water bucket and seated himself with his back to the wall. He knew that it would not be long until the news of his presence there had been circulated, and he believed that his wait would not be long. A man came slipping round the corner presently and Tarrant, instantly tensed, relaxed as he recognised the figure of the cowboy who had sought him at Mrs. Hemp's. For a moment there was no word spoken. The cowboy scruti-

nised the left side of Tarrant's coat and strove to decide what might be hidden underneath.

"You are hooked up all right, ain't you, Spence," he asked finally.

Tarrant nodded and said: "This is no place for a cowboy just now, son."

"Don't I know it?" was the reply. "But I was sent."

"Who sent you?"

"Ol' Arkansaw."

"Why?"

"Arkansaw told me to move fast and sudden and give you the word that Grogan is holed up somewhere on Main Street."

"Where is he?"

"Arkansaw didn't say. Said just tell you that. Your judgment was good, he says."

Tarrant nodded again, and looked down at the rider's high-heeled boots.

"Cowboy feet, travel," said he curtly.

"*Adios,* Spence," said the cowboy, moving on.

"So long," was the response.

Over on Main Street the news of Grogan's manœuver, which through some mysterious channel had reached the ears of Arkansaw, had spread swiftly and had occasioned surprise. Grogan's reputation was such that men had expected something better of him. Anybody could hide out and get a man. Grogan had been expected to show Tarrant up, which was a more complex and delicate matter altogether. Disappointment was expressed by the more garrulous. As the final moments of daylight began to draw to a close with no denouement of the promised drama this disappointment spread. The tension which

had stilled the troublous night life of Tin Spout gradually slackened. Men began to talk loudly and excitedly of other things. The Oil Exchange and other gambling places began to draw their quota of patrons. Pool balls clicked, and in Chili Joe's there was a clamour and clatter of dishes. Talkative men swore unnecessarily and offered to bet it wouldn't come off; others shrugged their shoulders and turned to other affairs.

And then Grogan was suddenly seen crossing Main Street as he hurried toward a side street which led to the rear of the livery stable. There was a deadly elation in his gait; his manner was the grimly pleased manner of a man who has had information which places the enemy in his power. The crowd swarmed toward the barn, and then suddenly it scattered like sheep from a wolf, for Grogan had crouched in the middle of the muddy street, drawn his weapon and aimed at a tall figure in blue that was stalking toward him from the other end of the block.

Tarrant merely stopped. He did not crouch or move. His hands hung at his side. His face was like a mask.

Grogan stared for a moment in complete bewilderment. Then a yelp of triumph issued from his throat and his teeth were bared.

"Get out of town, you four-flusher!" he growled, running forward to close pistol range. "I've got you now. Caught you asleep. You're busted. You're a bum, and I'm kicking you out of town. Get out. Travel on—or I'll hand it to you—now!"

In the Bon Ton Pool Parlor the marshal crashed senseless to the floor from the blow of a cue; and from corners, doors and windows, from every sheltered point of vantage, heads jutted and staring eyes beheld the drama in the

street. Tarrant stood still. The sight of the oncoming gunman with his upraised weapon apparently made no impression. A loose-mouthed fool cried out:

"The mutt hasn't got a gun!" and another urged Tarrant to run.

Grogan was close now. A sneer of triumph distorted his whole face, for even now Tarrant made no movement. Like a tiger making sure of his leap, Grogan poised himself within deadly range.

"I'll count three," he snarled, "I'll give you that long to travel. One—two——"

Men whose experiences qualified them to judge such affairs averred it was the fastest thing they had ever seen. So fast was it that there promptly arose a variety of opinions as to just what happened. It was universally agreed, however, that Grogan fired instantly upon his utterance of the word "two." No one was found who pretended to have heard him say "three." Opinion at first inclined to the belief that he had shot high. The more calm and accurate analysis that followed showed that Tarrant had gauged the treachery in Grogan's mind to the fraction of a second and at the word "two" had flung himself to the right. At the same time he had drawn the gun under the left breast of his coat and fired so swiftly that the roar of his volley seemed a continuation of Grogan's first shot.

Grogan fired again, but the bullet went into the mud at his feet. Tarrant stopped shooting. Grogan came on for a few steps more. Opposite the establishment of Chili Joe he came to a dead stop. He seemed undecided, but suddenly he came to an apparent decision, and dropping his revolver he staggered for the promise of shelter offered by Chili Joe's screen door.

Someone laughed and jibed: "Lost his nerve!"

But Grogan had lost more than his nerve. He plunged across the sidewalk and staggered headlong into the screen. There his legs bent under him and he fell and came to a rest with his head on the threshold of the store.

"We've got Tarrant just the same!" Bodine's voice from the fringe of the crowd rang triumphantly. "Go ahead there; go on and take him!"

Men advanced upon Tarrant. He saw them display stars and he passed over his gun.

"Take him to jail at once!"

Bodine was giving orders with a complete assurance of being obeyed.

"Come along," said an officer. "Come on!"

Tarrant saw Bodine's face above the crowd. The promoter's expression was one of cunning and triumph. Then the crowd pushed forward and Tarrant was led away.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A DILAPIDATED flivver bearing a rough-looking man rolled out of Tin Spout a few minutes after the shooting. The car went northward. It left the Tin Spout field and came to the line of the 88 Lease. Here, for apparently no good reason, it swung off the well-defined road which continued straight northward and went jolting over the rough soil toward the gate in the stockade surrounding Tarrant's well.

Buck and Elmer and the rest of the crew were apparently loafing. They had pulled the tools from the hole and swung them above the casing, and by the light of a gasoline flare they were excitedly studying the contents of the bailer which had been poured into the slush pool.

"We must send for Spence," said Buck; and then they heard and saw the car at the gate in the stockade.

A guard stepped forth and held up his hand. The driver came to a halt within easy speaking distance.

"This the way to Colson's Ranch?" he called.

It was not the way. Elmer told him so. Had he kept on the main road he would have come to the Colson Ranch in short order. He was off the road.

The driver swore good-humoredly.

"That's what I figured," said he, "but the garage man told me to hit off in here and I'd save time. Just keep on north on the main road, you say?"

"That's right," said Elmer.

"All right, thanks." The driver prepared to turn round.

"S'pose you heard the news?" he said casually.

"We ain't heard anything," said Elmer. "What is it—somebody bring in a gusher?"

"Don't kid me," said the man.

"Price of crude gone up?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard?" demanded the visitor. "No," he added with a look round; "I guess you wouldn't be here if you'd heard, considering you fellows make a play at being his friends, which he certainly could use a few right now, I'm thinking."

There was a chilled silence of several seconds.

"You ain't talking about the boss?" demanded Elmer.

"Shore am."

"Tarrant——"

"He shot Grogan down to Tin Spout this evening."

"Kill him?"

"Not quite. Plumb ruined his health, though."

"I figured he'd kill him dead sometime," said Elmer. "Did he get touched up any himself?"

The talebearer shook his head.

"No," he said slowly. "From what I hear of it, they claim he didn't give Grogan any chance. That's why I heard folks was so against him down there. 'Course I'm a stranger to you boys round here, and I never knew Tarrant from an owl, but I sort of figger a man's friends ought to be told when he's in a bad fix, no matter what folks say against him. They've got Tarrant in jail down there to Tin Spout and Grogan's friends are talking mean."

"How mean are they talking?" asked Elmer after a pause.

"Pretty mean," said the man, shaking his head.

"Go on," said Elmer.

"They are talking of getting him before the rangers come," said the man. "They are talking of taking him out of jail to-night."

There was another pause.

"Thank you, suh," said Elmer. "We're sure obliged."

"Of course I don't know—it's only what I heard talked of," said the man as he drove on.

"We're sure obliged to you," said Elmer.

The mud-covered flivver jolted back to the main road and turned north. It continued on its course until a dip in the road hid it from the well. Then the lights were switched off and the car swung off the road and came to a standstill. The driver leaped out and ran swiftly to a point where he could see and hear what was going on at the well.

Buck had moved before the talebearer was out of sight. His first action was to crank his car. In another moment the crew and the guards were struggling for room in the car or on the running boards.

"Mebbe somebody ought to stay on the lease," suggested Elmer dubiously.

"Lease, hell!" growled a guard. "You heard what he said, didn't you?"

"Bodine's gang will all be busy in town," said Buck.

"I reckon," said Elmer. "Let's go!"

Buck drove with a recklessness which tested the little car to the utmost, and they paid no attention to the touring car, laden with men, which started westward as they parked the flivver within the glare of Tin Spout's lights. They attracted some attention as they plowed their way through the crowds toward the frame shack with an iron cage inside which served as Tin Spout's lockup, for they

had been recognised promptly, and their faces were hard with recklessness. They came to an abrupt halt at the door of the jail. A small, bow-legged and tired-looking man with a long, drooping moustache barred the way.

"You gents was wanting something?" said he suggestively.

"A ranger!" exclaimed Buck. "Then they've come."

"Shore have," piped the little man. "I am them."

"Only one of you?" said Buck.

"Hell!" retorted the ranger. "They ain't but one prisoner, is they?"

"Is he all right?" demanded Elmer.

The ranger tilted his head back slowly until at last his eyes rested upon Elmer's face.

"Gosh a-whistling!" said he. "I did think for awhile I never would see the top of your carcass. Well, old-timer, I like nerve, but impudence don't set so well with me. Who gave you license to ask if my prisoner is all right? Don't you see I'm here?"

"We did hear some talk about a lynching," persisted Elmer.

"You ain't telling me?" said the ranger. "Shore, now, ain't it a sin the way folks will talk careless? They don't want to let me catch 'em at it. It's against the laws of the state of Texas."

"Yes," said Buck, "but this is Bodine's town, and Grogan was his gunman and Bodine is after Tarrant."

"Now let me tell you something, son," snapped the ranger; "this may have been Bodine's town up to about an hour ago, but at that time it came under the hand and rule of the state of Texas represented by the person of yours truly, and I'm doing the dealing at present; and

Bodine ain't setting in, and you boys ain't setting in, and by midnight there'll be four more rangers here and if we hear any more of this wicked talk we're going to lose patience. I'm taking care of the prisoner named Tarrant. His lawyer has been to see him. That's all, boys. You got permission to jog right along."

Elmer excused himself for a moment and slipped alone down to Bodine's office. The office was deserted. He went to the Oil Exchange, where business continued as usual, and thrusting the fat manager aside, mounted the platform.

"I'm looking for a party called Bodine," said the old fellow quietly. "Anybody happen to see him round?"

"Mr. Bodine is not here," said the manager.

"All right, hombre," retorted Elmer, "but don't roll your fat eyes at me, because I'm touchy to-night and I might go off. I reckon plenty of Bodine's gang are here," he continued quietly to the crowd, "and I want them to tell their boss I'll let him live on one condition: that Spence Tarrant gets a fair deal. If he don't, I'll kill Mr. Bodine."

Having delivered his message he stepped down from the platform and left the room. Outside the doorway he almost collided with Marjorie. The girl stared at him with alarm in her eyes.

"You in town!" she gasped. "Oh, Elmer! But the other men are at the well, surely?"

A chill passed through Elmer's spare frame.

"What do you mean, Miss Marjorie?" he stammered. "No, the boys are all with me—gosh-a-mighty, you don't mean they——" He began to tremble with anger. "If they have," he began, but she cut him short.

"You must get back at once!" she cried. "Get the men. I will get a fast car. Oh, hurry, hurry!"

There was little said as they raced out of town in a large service car. Marjorie sat beside the driver and she leaned forward, striving to pierce the darkness ahead. The others followed her example. The fear that they had fallen into a trap closed their lips. They might have cursed themselves, but the presence of the girl in the front seat prevented.

"What was that?" cried Marjorie, as the sound of an explosion shattered the night.

No one answered. The car swung over a rise, bringing them within view of the well site.

The tale of what had happened during their absence was writ red in the heavens which softly reflected the glow from the burning buildings and rig of Well No. 6. The derrick was in flames, its burning skeleton outlined against the dark. The ruins of the other buildings smoldered brightly. The explosion had apparently been in the boiler house, for fresh flames were rising about the ruined machinery. Figures of men were seen running away. A high-powered car thrummed some place in the darkness and raced out of hearing. By the time the service car reached the site it was deserted and only the flames and wreckage testified to the fact that men had swarmed about the well but a few minutes before.

Buck ran in beneath the flaming derrick and out again.

"The hole is all right," he panted. "They didn't touch it. Saving it for the Syndicate, I suppose."

"The option expires at noon to-morrow!" cried Marjorie. "Oh, is there nothing to be done?"

"Yes," said Elmer, "and I'm going back and find Bodine and do it now!"

The girl caught him by the arm.

"Will that save the well for Mr. Tarrant?" she demanded. "Will it do him any good? Think! You left here to-night because you wanted to help him. Nobody can blame you for that. But now he needs your help, too. Oh, if I could only do something! Surely *you* can do something. The well was nearly completed, wasn't it? Is there no way to go on—to finish drilling?"

As if in answer to her question the burning derrick buckled and sagged and crashed to the ground with a roar.

"You must do something!" cried the girl, undaunted. "I won't believe that it is hopeless, not even now. I won't, I won't!"

"There's just one chance," cried Buck, spurred by her words. "They didn't know we were through the cap rock. We'll put in a big shot in the morning. It is a poor bet, but it's all we can do."

"What does that mean?" demanded Marjorie.

"It just means," drawled Elmer, "that I won't look up Bodine until to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN the jail at Tin Spout that night Tarrant lay on a cot staring up at the barred ceiling. It was hot outside that night, and in the jail the air was stifling. A highjacker who had held up a restaurant occupied the cell on his right; in the cage to his left was incarcerated a bootlegger who had knifed a deputy. The heat tortured them, and they grumbled and moaned and cursed constantly. Rambling protests of innocence, of double-crossing, rolled from their lips, and alternately and together they made the night hideous.

Tarrant was silent. He lay on his cot in a mood of resignation. Through his mind there ran a film which embraced all that seemed important in his life. The film began with his first sight of Marjorie Dickinson at the depot of Tin Spout; it ended abruptly with the clang of the cell door as it shut him in. He saw in the darkness above his head her face as he had first beheld it, fine and beautiful and ablaze with indignation over the treatment of the pony, Nine Spot. He lived over the scenes in which she had been involved; the brief moment that evening on the Stringer Roof; the night at the Country Club; the evening when she had come to warn him that Bodine was after the 88 Lease. He saw also the scene when he had picked her up brutally and kissed her. It didn't matter now. They had got him. What might have been was only a dream. It could never come true. But it was well to have dreamed.

"Tarrant," said the little ranger softly.

"What is it?" asked Tarrant listlessly.

"You all right?"

"Yes."

"You were so danged quiet," explained the officer, "I wasn't sure. I guess you ain't in so wrong, after all."

"How come?" asked Tarrant disinterestedly.

"Well, they tell me that party you nicked ain't going out," said the ranger. "You crippled him up so he won't do any more gun throwing, but they claim he will make a live of it."

"It was an even break," declared Tarrant, "but they will have the court, so that won't count."

"Mebbe," was the reply. "Your lawyer's fixing to bail you in the morning."

"Thanks," said Tarrant casually.

The news did not greatly excite him. A load of hopelessness lay heavily upon his spirit. He knew there could be nothing between him and Marjorie after this. Her code of life embraced no comprehension of the code of life as he lived it. To her the affair with Grogan could be only a lawless shooting affray. She had warned him, and he had the opportunity to avoid it by going away. Of course he couldn't do that. Everybody would understand, except the one whose opinion mattered. In his mood of depression he saw himself outlawed, stamped with the brand of the violent criminal. With her gentleness, her sweetness, how could she see him otherwise? On the other hand, Bodine would appear in the light in which he had consistently sought to picture himself in Marjorie's eyes—the powerful, orderly business man in competition with a reckless ruffian.

"Ruffian," whispered Tarrant. "That's the word."

So the dream ended. It was his own fault, the fault of his breeding and his life which had made it impossible for him to conform to her code. All things considered, it had been presumptuous, as her father declared, for him to aspire to any association with her. She was a fine spirit. A creature of another plane. He was only a boss roughneck of the oil fields, as hard and rough as any man in the game. The sense of frustrated youth, youth that had hoped and dreamed of something finer, stirred him a little, but it was only a flutter. He was beaten. He saw no light in the future. The incentive to struggle had gone out of him. Even the thoughts of Bodine and his victory failed to bring back his nerve.

He was released from jail in the forenoon. His lawyer's optimism and fighting spirit failed to find any response in him.

"I'm sure obliged, Al, for your hustling so early," he said; "it could have waited, though."

"Waited, nothing!" snapped the lawyer. "If you knew half of what's been happening this night you'd snap out of it. Talk about hustling early! Do you think I had any sleep last night? I should say not. I've had the governor on the long distance. I've got a Department of Justice man headed this way right now. They're going to know they have been in a fight, Spence; I promise you that."

"That's fine of you, Al," said Tarrant dully.

"I was only the instrument," said the lawyer. "Somebody else gave me the information that is going to be the big surprise to them."

"I'm sure much obliged," repeated Tarrant. "You don't need me right now, Al?"

"Why?"

"I figure I'll go out to the lease," replied Tarrant. "I'll have to take down my rig."

The lawyer's expression of fighting optimism vanished abruptly.

"Why, I don't believe I would do that, Spence," he said with assumed carelessness. "Better stay round with me. Come to think of it, I do need you. Sure, we have got to get together in my office and put our evidence in shape and outline the case."

Tarrant's numbed mind barely managed to catch the note of well-intentioned falseness in the attorney's remarks. He did not comprehend at first and stood staring stupidly at the man of law. Gradually his faculties awakened.

"What's wrong, Al?" he asked in a new tone.

"Wrong?" repeated the lawyer evasively. "Who said there was anything wrong?"

"What's wrong at the lease?" cried Tarrant. His eyes flashed again, and youth and strength came creeping back into his drawn face.

"I wouldn't go out to the lease just now, Spence," said the lawyer.

"Out with it!" roared Tarrant. "Come across."

"Somebody jumped your lease last night," came the reply. "Elmer and Buck and the crew were drawn to town by a report that you were in danger. The outfit was in flames when they got back."

Tarrant drew the first full breath he had taken since

the shooting. His great lungs swelled and his nostrils distended.

"Bodine!" he murmured.

The lethargy which the night had induced fell from him like a discarded cloak. His lips tightened and his breath came and went rapidly. Then he laughed. The lawyer started and drew away.

"Bodine!" said Tarrant. "He's made a clean sweep of me. He beat me out with the girl; he jailed me; and he busted me flat. He said he would do it, and he has. But he did it wrong. He didn't play fair. I don't blame the boys. Bodine knew they would come to town. The dirty hound!"

He went down the street with his head up and smiling. The contentment of desperation was upon him. He had lost all, therefore he had nothing to lose. He felt he had nothing to win, either. Only he craved one moment, one moment alone with Bodine, Bodine within reach of his bare hands.

The door of the office was open. Tarrant entered with the lightness of a cat. A clerk rose to question him. With a swift jerk Tarrant threw him outside and stepped in. Bodine turned from his desk with a feline instinct of danger. Tarrant laughed.

"The show-down, Bodine!" he cried. "No! With our bare hands!"

With a leap he hurled himself across the room and caught the hand that had slipped into an open drawer. The shot that Bodine fired went into the desk, and Tarrant wrested the gun from him and hurled it through the window.

"Bare hands, Bodine!" he roared. "That's all I've got

left now; you've taken all the rest; and that's how we'll play the show-down!"

Bodine had recovered promptly from the moment of panic into which Tarrant's startling appearance had thrown him. His face became tigerish. The pose of the suave promoter was cast aside. He was himself now, frankly, Bodine the gambler.

"You damned roughneck!" he barked. "You damned pauper!"

"I've still got my bare hands, Bodine!"

"You will have it, eh?" roared Bodine.

He feinted with the skill of the experienced fighter he was and struck. Tarrant took it and laughed. Another blow dropped him over a chair and he kicked the broken pieces away and laughed again. He ducked inside a blow and caught Bodine in his arms. For seconds they strained chest to chest and eye to eye and the panting of the crowd at the door was audible in the silence. Slowly Bodine gave ground. Snarling and spitting like a cat he strove to tear himself away. Tarrant put all the strength of his body into a heave and threw his opponent the length of the room. Bodine rebounded like a rubber ball. His rage was frightful. All thoughts of scientific fighting had fled from his mind, and he fought like a beast, elemental, primitive in his frantic efforts to hurt and cripple.

Tarrant fought back with a recklessness that told how little he asked of the future. His hardness of body and his youth alone saved him. He paid no more attention to Bodine's brutal kicks than he did to his blows. He let his head slip into a chancery for the privilege of driving a blind swing into Bodine's face.

He was too strong and too desperate. Bodine broke

free and sought to keep him away. Like a force which nothing could hurt or stop, Tarrant pursued him. Blows stopped him in his tracks with the suddenness of a bullet and he rocked on his heels, and came on.

"The show-down, Bodine," he panted. "With bare hands!"

Bodine summoned all his strength and skill for one ultimate onslaught. His rush carried Tarrant back across the room and against the wall. Bodine struck till he was arm weary. He stepped back. The tottering figure against the wall lurched forward.

"The show-down!" it mumbled.

Bodine's nerve broke. He turned to flee by the door. Old Man Swanson threw him back. Tarrant vaguely distinguished his lawyer and a stranger behind Swanson, but he did not care.

He came slowly across the room and caught Bodine by the throat. He bent him back inch by inch over a table. His fist was raised to strike, and then, without releasing his hold, he paused and threw up his head.

The crowd outside had suddenly assumed the same attitude. There was a whistling sound in the air, as if of a pent-up hurricane venting itself through a small pipe, a sound weird and uncanny to the stranger, but rife with a throbbing tale to these oilmen. The sound grew in volume; it was the shriek of an imprisoned gale fighting to free itself. It came from the north. It rose to an incredible pitch and then it died away.

A girl came running out of the telephone exchange. It was Marjorie.

"They did it—they did it!" she cried. "It's No. 6! Buck and Elmer put a shot in as a last resort, and brought

in a gusher. I had Colson's Ranch on the 'phone, and they say they can see it, and the oil—the oil is spouting a hundred feet high!"

Tarrant spoke faintly:

"What time is it, Al?"

"Eleven ten," came the reply. "Tarrant, it's yours!"

Tarrant let fall his upraised fist and released his hold.

"The show-down, Bodine!" he cried in triumph. "You can go."

"He cannot!" snapped the stranger beside Tarrant's lawyer. "I want him for violating the postal law——"

"To hell with the law!" cried the crowd. "Didn't you hear? A gusher—oil a hundred feet high!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TIN SPOUT poured itself northward. The 88 Lease had become an irresistible magnet. An outpouring of motor cars which soon reached halfway to the lease was on the road before Marjorie had told the story which she had waited tensely all morning to hear over the 'phone. The air was alive with the throb of cars starting away; the road was hidden beneath a cloud of dust. Each car carried its full load, and after the cars were all gone, motor trucks were called into service. A few riders on ponies followed the trucks and then came the horse-drawn vehicles and, last of all, a straggling crowd on foot, all bent upon beholding with their own eyes the new miracle which had blown all other interests out of the life of Tin Spout as a puff of wind blows out a candle.

Tin Spout was starting anew. There was a new force on the scene and the air was electric with the sudden change. Soon the forerunners of the crowd were within sight of the well, and they gasped and cheered. Above the casing a solid column of oil was shooting high in the air and breaking into a plume and splattering itself upon the landscape. The odour of fresh oil was in the air. The crowd stood by and looked in awe at the fortune that was pouring up from the earth. It was a new force in the world, a power released for the service of man. Men and women quickened to new life as they gazed at it, a rich dark column of new clean wealth, a veritable geyser of thick, black oil.

Tarrant was the oilman instantly. He sat in Bodine's office and gave orders. A cap and a gate for use when the flow had subsided sufficiently to permit control of the flood of oil went out on one of the first trucks. He gave contracts for storage tanks and engaged men by the score to hasten out and build a dike about the well to hold the oil until the tanks could be constructed. Men rushed to seek his orders and to execute them. He was the owner of a gusher. He looked about the office. The room was wrecked, but more than that, it had already assumed the air of a place whose day has passed and which has been discarded and abandoned. A framed certificate of Pan-National stock was in the litter upon the floor. Someone's heel had crushed through it ruthlessly.

And when the crowded day was done, and his triumph as an oil man assured beyond any possible doubt, and the softness of dusk usurped the glare of day, Tarrant broke. The hard mask of purposeful determination fell away from his countenance. The grim fighting man, hurling himself instantly into the struggle to make his victory secure, vanished. In the moment of his triumph when his name was upon all lips as the man of the hour, as the Winner, he faltered and gave way. No one knew the tension he laboured under during the afternoon; no one suspected the tumult of reborn emotions, of glimmering hope, of anguish, of black despair, which he fought down, smothered and kept concealed as he met the demands of his good fortune. True friends would have slapped him upon the back, sycophants would have fawned upon him; but they regarded the grimness of his expression and let him alone. He heard whispered comments—"Hard as steel" —and he hid beneath his mask of hardness the bitterness

that the words evoked. He saw the job through, saw it through with an expert's completeness of detail, and no one suspected the turmoil, the fear, the weakness, that agitated his heart.

Where he went now he was the centre of an excited throng. Inured as the people were to miraculously sudden rises to fortune they were, nevertheless, eager for the thrill of reflected glory to be achieved about the person of a new magnate. They swarmed to Tarrant. And in the evening's crowds which gathered about him there was no man fainter of heart or more apprehensive of the future than the man whom all envied. The depression which had so darkened his few hours in jail was still with Tarrant, and the conviction was upon him that he had proved himself unworthy to hope for the finer things which he had glimpsed in the presence of Marjorie. After all that was what he had striven for. He realised this fully, now that the material rewards of his struggle were assured. He had, as an oil-man, been determined to justify his faith in himself and in the existence of the great pool of oil in the Tin Spout field. He had been out to reap the riches which inevitably would be the due of the man who should discover the pool. This day he had fulfilled both these objects. He had been true to his faith, and he had gained what men called success. And now he knew that beneath these aims had been a stronger force, and it was this force which had driven him on. The instinct to advance, not materially alone, but in Life, the yearning for a finer existence, for ideals above which he had known—this was the urge that had held him steadfastly to the course of ambition. He had come far, from cowboy to oil king, and he was still young. But the sense of doom

was upon his spirit. He felt he could go no further in the things that mattered to him, could not achieve anything better. His spirit groped imploringly for a new faith, but the affray with Grogan rose up in his mind and damned him. In the bitterness of the moment he cursed the fate that had given him the vision to see and to crave something finer.

He took advantage of the first shades of night to lose himself from the eager crowds and to wander alone in the empty darkness about the town. He found himself upon the railway right of way south of town, and he looked back at Tin Spout's lights, wishful to put them far behind him. The excitement which thralled the place seemed to charge the atmosphere about it. Men were talking wildly back there; and his name, enviously uttered, was upon all lips.

He turned and shambled back over the ties and came to the old shipping-pens and the livery stable where he had left Nine Spot. He roused himself from his mood as he heard the pony's hoofs beating a fretful tattoo in his stall. The stableman was not to be seen. Tarrant fed and watered the neglected animal but the grateful whinnying of Nine Spot failed to touch him. He stood stock-still and entirely unresponsive while the pony nuzzled his arm. A strange sort of courage had arisen within him and he was icy cold.

"I've got to see her," he said aloud. "Just see her."

When he moved it seemed through no volition of his own; it was as if an extraneous force moved the reluctant body along the dark side street toward the home of the "Deaf" Hemps where Marjorie was stopping. So it happened that he all but ran into her before he was conscious

that anyone was approaching, and when he saw her he felt it must be a fantasy, a figment of his disordered mind that stood before him. She, too, stopped abruptly, and they stood silently looking at one another from a distance. Tarrant finally moved toward her, slowly, incredulously. Marjorie did not move, but only looked at him; and suddenly the darkness seemed shattered for Tarrant, and he saw her in a flash of light. He drew the back of his hand tremblingly across his eyes as if to test his vision.

"I—I have just been down to fix up Nine Spot," he said weakly.

"I was going there to see to him," said she simply, but she made no move to turn back.

Tarrant fought with himself to achieve a moment of his wonted self-control; he tried to speak calmly, but calm words would not come at all; only there came an inarticulate cry:

"Marjorie!"

And at the tale of pain and anguish and yearning which the cry told the girl threw out her hands and moaned: "Spence!" And he reached for her hands fumblingly, and when he held them she leaned back, her upturned eyes wet with tears, and then with a queer, happy sob, she cast herself forward upon the shelter of his bosom.

Tarrant held her off, his hands upon her shoulders.

"You—you mean it?" he protested. "You—you are sure you know what you're doing?"

She smiled as she looked up at him. The smile wiped away all doubts, all need for words. His amazement was still great but it did not affect the manner in which his

long arms gathered her to him and lifted her up until their yearning lips met.

"One thing I'd like to get straight, Honey," said Tarrant a few evenings later as she sat upon his knee in the darkened parlor of the Hemps, "is when you first got it into your head that maybe some day I'd do to take along? Was it after I came up to see you that day in Chicago?"

"That was nice, wasn't it, dear, that day by the lake?" she responded.

Tarrant chuckled as he drew her closer and kissed her.

"You're not telling, is that it, Honey?" he whispered.

"Why do you want to know?" she demanded.

"It's this way, Honey," he continued, "I reasoned that I had made such a bad impression on you that there was no hope for me; and the only time I can think of when it might have been different was up North that time. But that wasn't enough to make you want to marry me, was it?"

"It didn't hurt your case any," she said, stroking his brown cheek. "It made me think more highly of you, I think. But—it was before that."

"When was it?" he urged. "When did you first think——?"

"I didn't think, Spence," she interrupted.

"Well, when——"

"I'll never tell you," she protested, drawing his face down against her's. "Never, never, never!"

"All right, Honey," he laughed. "This suits me."

"But if you must know," she went on rapidly, cuddling closer within his arms, "It—it was that first time you—you dear brute!—when you—" she kissed him swiftly — "on the horse! Don't laugh, dear; just kiss me."

And now a true oil boom came to Tin Spout. The paper boom had collapsed as a balloon when the air is let out of it. The colossal stock-selling campaign of the Pan-National Syndicate was ruined almost overnight. The public had been mulcted for millions, but this was no novelty, and it soon was forgotten. Bodine's share of the loot enabled him and the broken Grogan to flee into Mexico. It was not long before word drifted back that the smugglers and gamblers in Tia Juana acknowledged a new leader, who was very much at home in his surroundings and who established as lookout in one of his gaming houses a scar-faced man who made absolutely no pretense of being a tough one.

Meanwhile the oil fever raged at Tin Spout with the customary virulence of the disease. The new fame of Tin Spout drew its quota of wealth-hungry citizens from all parts of the country, and oilmen came thither from England and Holland. Wall Street was attracted, the skyrocket speculative financiers and the solid oil companies as well. There was high-gravity crude oil beneath this boom, and a refinery was erected, and trains of loaded tank cars rumbled over the branch line that cut the old 88 Ranch in two.

Perhaps the spectacle which the locality now presented was the most typically American that our generation affords. For here was a heterogeneous horde, recklessly optimistic and eagerly concentrated upon the feat of colossal material accomplishments, quite regardless of the consequences to self, to neighbour or to future generations. It was childishly swayed by propaganda, running like a flock of sheep at the beck of the unquenchable spirit that urged it onward. If it scrambled madly for a share of

earth's bountiful resources, it also spent itself unquestioningly in the fight, and asked no odds from man or fate.

It wasted deplorably of wealth and strength and life; but out of the welter insistently there rose the spiritual guarantors of permanence and progress. Men died because of careless methods of work and living, and were hastily buried and their graves were moved to make way for the drilling rigs; but those guilty of the apparent desecration would not have had it otherwise had it been their lot to be among the unfortunate. The job of the men operating in the field, as they saw it, was to produce oil. Critics, with a due regard for ethics and traditions, might well be appalled at the methods employed by these men; but upon one fact there could be cast no doubt—they did the job.

One night soon after the new boom had begun in earnest, a northbound train with an observation car on the end was preparing to depart from the trim brick station which was being rushed toward completion at Tin Spout. A young man and a girl came unobtrusively along the train, and at the sight of the couple the porter on the rear car hastily opened the polished brass gate of the observation platform.

A tall old man and a stocky young man, each bearing a suitcase and handbag, followed behind the pair. They surrendered the baggage reluctantly to the porter. Their occupation gone, they stood about clumsily.

"Looks a little as if she might cool off a bit to-night, mebbe," said Elmer portentously.

"It is a little cooler, for a fact," responded Buck.

"Boys," said Tarrant. "I have never tried to tell you

how I feel toward you, and I am not going to try now; but——"

"You better get aboard," interrupted Buck, making a great ado over looking at his watch; "she'll be pulling out in a second."

"Sure will," agreed Elmer, likewise consulting his timepiece. "So long, Spence; so long, Mrs. Tarrant."

"Oh!" cried Marjorie. "Do you think you are going like that?"

She hesitated a moment, then she stepped forward swiftly and threw her arms about them and kissed them, one after the other.

Buck and Elmer stood and looked at the pair on the rear platform as the train pulled out. They stood there long after Tarrant and Marjorie had ceased to be visible, after the lights of the train had grown dim and disappeared and even after its rumble had ceased to mark its course as it rolled nearer the Red River on its way northward. When it was gone beyond all sight and hearing Elmer cleared his throat and looked up at the sky.

"Looks sort of as if it might cool off a little, mebbe," he asserted.

"Eh, yah," agreed Buck, "it sort of does."

THE END